

HUMOR IN THE PULPIT

A Professional Project

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the Faculty of the Graduate School  
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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by

Edward Gordon Hunter

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EDWARD GORDON HUNTER,

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*Faculty Committee*

K. Morgan Edwards  
Ronald E. Osborn

\_\_\_\_\_

April 12, 1978  
Date

Joseph C. Haugh  
Dean

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## ABSTRACT

This Professional Project on Humor in the Pulpit was undertaken to ascertain not simply the place of humor in preaching, but to make a statement as to its effectiveness in the pulpit. I discovered early in the study that comparatively little has been written on the use of humor in preaching. Many books exist regarding a psychological analysis of humor, a number of helpful volumes on the theories of comedy/laughter have appeared through the years, and there are innumerable books on anthologies of humor--but basically nothing definitive so far as humor may relate to preaching.

We have attempted to survey, briefly, the question "What is Humor?" in our first chapter. This is intended as nothing more than a general introduction to the vast field of humor/comedy/laughter. In the second chapter we have dealt with "The Rhetoric of Humor" from both the historical and contemporary standpoint. What are the roots of humor? What did the Greek and Roman rhetoricians have to say about it? What do modern speech theorists have to say about the use of humor in public speaking? This chapter focuses primary attention upon the "functions" of humor in public address. What are its real purposes, aims, possibilities?

Finally, in our third chapter we have analyzed in some detail the humor of two preachers who are noted for

their effective use of humor in the pulpit--Bishop Gerald H. Kennedy and Dr. Kenneth A. Carlson. Particular emphasis has been placed on their selection of humorous stories and the function it served in the particular messages we analyzed.

This has been a rewarding inquiry. It is hoped that at least some bit of knowledge has been shed on a relatively unexplored field--the effective use of humor in the art of preaching.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the neglected facets of preaching is the effective use of humor. Some ministers use it frequently, others sparingly, and still others not at all.

Little has been written on the subject from the standpoint of preaching. If preachers show any skill in their use of humor it can be assumed they either have a natural aptitude for it, or they have made somewhat of a private study in the techniques and uses of humor. In the majority of cases they have probably learned most from trial and error. For those who use it not at all it must be said they are missing a very effective means of communication.

None will deny that preaching is serious business. It is for that very reason, then, that humor is desirable. Some might even say imperative.

Some of the portions of the gospel can be better understood in the context of humor. Jesus himself used humor in this way. When he spoke of a camel going through the eye of a needle and likened it to a rich man, laden with his material possessions, attempting to get into heaven, he was using subtle humor. When he spoke of those who were concerned with the splinter in their brother's eye but completely unaware of the "massive beam" in their own, he utilized humor. Elton Trueblood analyzes Jesus' use of humor and concludes that he most often used it for

a specific purpose--which is quite contrary to our approach:

The laugh for which we strive is often the sole justification of the entire effort. We seek humor for humor's sake. There seems to be little or none of this in the recorded words of Christ, where the purpose is always the revelation of some facet of truth which would not otherwise be revealed. The humor of Christ is employed, it would appear, only because it is a means of calling attention to what would, without it, remain hidden or unappreciated. Truth, and truth alone, is the end.<sup>1</sup>

We live in a society that places a high premium on humor. It has become a national pasttime. Professional comedians are among our most highly paid and sought-after entertainers. Even a cursory analysis of television fare would indicate that programs based on humor are the highest in demand. If secular man is so enamored with humor we need not assume that the religious man is that much different. Everyone enjoys the lighter side of life.

Let us not overlook the obvious in any analysis of humor as Harvey Mindess reminds us:

We all like to laugh. From infancy to old age, regardless of intellectual or social status, people in all groups and cultures enjoy a smile or chuckle. Laughter, in short, is fun. It is gratifying in itself, no matter under what conditions it has been elicited. As such it is part and parcel of our capacity for relaxation, ease, delight, for happiness in all its many hues. Any explanation of humor that professes to dig to its roots must keep this point in mind.<sup>2</sup>

Our purpose in this study will be to examine first the general nature of humor under the first chapter: What

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<sup>1</sup>Elton Trueblood, The Humor of Christ (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 51-2.

<sup>2</sup>Harvey Mindess, Laughter and Liberation (Los Angeles: Nash, 1971), p. 24.

is Humor? Beyond that we shall look at the rhetoric of humor in both a contemporary and historical sense, examining the classical rhetoricians such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian and moving up to several modern speech theorists. The emphasis here will be on the functions of humor in public address.

Finally we shall examine the preaching of two contemporary ministers known for their effective use of humor: Bishop Gerald H. Kennedy, retired bishop of the Los Angeles area of the United Methodist Church, and Dr. Kenneth A. Carlson, until recently senior pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Glendale, California.

On the basis of our findings we shall formulate conclusions to guide the minister in the use of humor.



## Chapter 1

### WHAT IS HUMOR?

#### A. The Genesis of Humor

Humor has always been a part of the human mystique even prior to formation of the word itself. The word "humor" has undergone many changes. The Greeks popularized the concept (comedy in particular) but the Romans probably first defined the word (humor). As a latin word it meant simply "wetness," a meaning still found in our words "humid" and "humidity." But "wetness" took on a special meaning in connection with the medical theories and practices of the Greek Hippocrates and his successors and "humour" came to mean the liquid currents which flowed through the human body. On these four humours--the blood, the phlegm, the yellow bile and the black bile--depended all of a person's health and vitality. If all went well the individual was said to be in good health. If not, disease appeared. The person was then in "ill-humour" or "out of humour." The physician's task was to help nature keep the individual in "good humour."

From the Greek standpoint, as far back as Plato and Aristotle laughter was considered the proper corrective of the excessive, the ridiculous, and the ludicrous. The individual who possessed an excess of humor became a "humorist" and hence an object of laughter. We shall speak of such

"objects of laughter" later. From "humorist" signifying an individual subject to humours it was but a short step to "humorist" meaning someone who was amusing and facetious, an individual skilled in the literary or artistic expression of humor.

From this usage it was easy for the word to branch off in either of two contrasted directions. "Humour" could be used to mean "caprice," "whim," "wilfulness"; or it could be used to imply something rather odd, or exceptional or incongruous. It was this last meaning which presently vanquished and overcame all others, giving us our modern word humor, which grew at length to imply not merely incongruity but something pleasing and amusingly incongruous. But the word only settled down to this meaning in recent times. Dr. Johnson in his famous Lexicon of 1755 gave a list of nine definitions of humor running all the way from "moisture" through "temper" and "jocularly" to "caprice."<sup>1</sup>

The origin of humor may have started in a negative context according to Grotjahn:

The clown's history reaches back through the ages to the jester, the fool, and the dwarf of medieval days. Originally the clown was a member of a pathetic crew. With the uninhibited cruelty of former times, people laughed freely at cripples, paralytics, amputees, mid-gets, monsters, the deaf and the mute, the blind, the poor and the crazy.<sup>2</sup>

It is reasonable to say now, however, that comedy has long since been redeemed. It is, today, a most respected and acceptable form of human behavior. It is even therapeutic to laugh. Medical science welcomes and encourages the use of humor as a valuable tool in healing.

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen B. Leacock, Humor and Humanity (New York: Holt, 1938), pp. 8,9.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Grotjahn, Beyond Laughter (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), p. 91.

We have come far enough in our evaluation and use of humor for Fulton J. Sheen to say in his book Life is Worth Living: "Man is the only joker in the deck of nature."

Let us look at a few of the classic definitions of humor composed by the experts: Sigmund Freud: "Laughter occurs when repressing energy is freed from its static function of keeping something forbidden under repression and away from consciousness."<sup>3</sup> Joseph K. Feibleman: "Comedy consists in the indirect affirmation of the ideal logical order by means of the derogation of the limited order of actuality."<sup>4</sup> Joyce C. Hertzler: "(Humor) is a fundamental, complicated, many-faceted, physico-psychic-social activity . . . a surge of vital feeling."<sup>5</sup>

None of these was intended as a humorous definition, obviously, but in a wry sense they collectively may be.

The meaning of humor is illusory, evasive, as the definitions above would suggest. Everyone "knows" what humor is, yet few can define it. What makes us laugh? For Nietzsche it was the foreboding pessimism and suffering he saw in the world: "Man alone suffers so excruciatingly in the world that he was compelled to invent laughter."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 255-6.

<sup>4</sup>James K. Feibleman, In Praise of Comedy (New York: Horizon Press, 1970), pp. 178-9.

<sup>5</sup>Joyce C. Hertzler, Laughter (New York: Exposition Press, 1970), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Gary Webster, Laughter in the Bible (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1960), p. 29.

Perhaps it may be what Anthony M. Ludovici describes as "man's way of showing his fangs."<sup>7</sup> Here are a few other negative proposals relating to humor:

"Laughter is mad," says the Book of Ecclesiastes, "and mirth, what is it?" "The pleasantest laughter," says Sophocles, "is at the expense of our enemies." Or Cicero: "Laughter has its springs in some kind of meanness or deformity." And St. John Chrysostom, "Laughter does not seem to be an (actual) sin, but it leads to sin." This opinion, unfortunately, has been confirmed by a great many of the more famous later thinkers. "Laughter," says Joseph Addison, ". . . weakens the powers of the soul." "I am neither of a melancholy nor a cynical disposition," says Lord Chesterfield in a letter to his son, "but I am sure that, since I have had the full use of my reason, nobody has ever heard me laugh."<sup>8</sup>

#### B. What Makes Something Humorous?

A variety of situations, circumstances and events combine to make something humorous. Humor is found in likely and unlikely places. Hertzler has compiled a list of subjects and/or situations that contribute to humor:

Human beings tend to respond with laughter when they are confronted with the incongruous, the contradictory, the inharmonious, the unfitting, the inappropriate, the imperfect or crude; the accidental, the disorderly, or unusual; the startling, the mischievous, the awkward; the ironical, the ludicrous, the ridiculous, or absurd; the pretentious, inflated, humbug, or masquerading; the eccentric or queer; the clever or misshapened; the logically incoherent or implausible; The monstrous, the indecent, the deformed, the deviate, the grotesque.<sup>9</sup>

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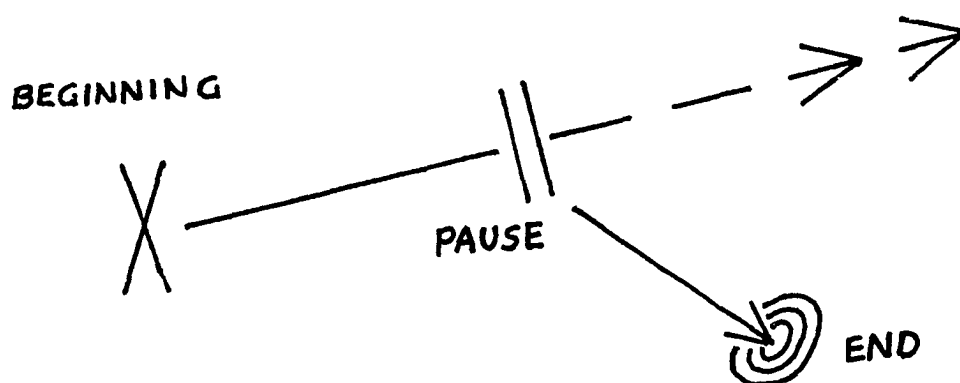
<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>William O. Douglas (ed.) The Mind and Faith of A. Powell Davies (New York: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 208-9.

<sup>9</sup>Hertzler, p. 13.

Some humor (laughter) is not intended to be humorous. There is the laughter of the conqueror, the conquered, the laughter of triumph and exultation. There is the laughter of one who has been "found out." One can hear David laugh wryly when confronted by Nathan the Prophet. We read of the laughter of Sarah when informed in her old age that she would bear a son--the laughter of unbelief. There is the laughter accompanying the evil deed and there is the laughter of lust. But these are outside the scope of this paper.

Mindess gives us an interesting graph that depicts what makes something humorous.<sup>10</sup> The story proceeds in one, logical, direction. In order for it to be humorous it must veer off in an unexpected direction:



Humor--as with beauty--is in the eye of the beholder.

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<sup>10</sup>Mindess, p. 150.

There are those who can perceive humor in very unlikely situations and circumstances. Will Rogers was an excellent example. He had an uncanny ability to detect incongruity in the most unlikely places. He was not afraid to poke fun at the great or the near-great. Those who enjoyed it the most were generally the subjects of his humor. He was not coarse or abrasive. He used gentle humor. His purpose was, among other things, to help his subjects to laugh at themselves.

Speaking of those who were noted for their humor there is another group who, ironically, may have been very troubled individuals. Martin Grotjahn speaks of this latter group, often professional entertainers, who in reality (under the surface) were even anti-social:

In contrast to his success as a public entertainer, the wit in private life and personal contact is often admired and enjoyed to only a limited extent; rarely is he loved warmly and then only when he stops being witty. He is too hostile and too defensive in his interpersonal relations. He attacks; he lets nobody really come close to him. He fascinates and he charms, but finally alienates people. He makes them stare at his brilliance, but it will blind them. They feel overpowered by him, rendered helpless in laughter, or, as the analyst might say, castrated. Wit can kill.<sup>11</sup>

If this sounds harsh and overdrawn (as well it may be), we might consider the case of a Freddie Prinze or a W. C. Fields.

Fields, for instance, left home at the age of eleven and was thereafter on his own. He was terribly bitter

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<sup>11</sup>Grotjahn, p. 46.

toward his father when he left, and such bitterness, unfortunately, was transferred to society. His life was a constant battle for survival.

He joined himself to a fruit peddler as a lad and practiced juggling with the peddler's fruit. He became quite adept at it. So intent was he on becoming "the world's best juggler" that his fingers would be raw and bleeding after hours of practice. Eventually he became a professional entertainer and was billed as "The World's Greatest Juggler." When he attained success it did not bring him peace of mind, unfortunately. He went from juggling to a comic--thence to Hollywood.

Strangely, he harbored great resentment toward his fellow professionals. He constantly criticized other comedians and was "by his own admission" superior to them. One of his chief antagonists was Charles Chaplin. He had few close friends. At the age of sixty-six he died of over-consumption of alcohol. He left \$800,000 in his estate for a "W. C. Fields College for Orphan Boys and Girls, Where No Religion of Any Sort is to be Preached." He (obviously) distrusted all religions and styled himself as an agnostic. Upon his death his body was placed in an unmarked grave for several years, finally exhumed and placed in a more noteworthy location.

He had an unhappy marriage in the early part of his career. His wife and only son returned upon his death to

claim kinship with him. They demanded a portion of his estate.

He trusted no one and lived in constant fear of being robbed or kidnapped. He kept money in so many banks that he lost track of them. He had a loaded rifle in his rented home in Bel Air and often shot at would-be intruders on his property.

The irony of Fields' life was that, though personally miserable much of the time, he brought laughter to scores of others. His style of humor was unique.<sup>12</sup>

In fairness to other professional comedians it should be stated that many, undoubtedly, have come from quite normal backgrounds and have found enough delightful experiences in their childhood from which to draw an array of experiences to delight audiences for years.

### C. The Preacher and Humor

The minister who wishes to make the best use of humor will begin to perfect the art of seeing humor in many different situations and circumstances: in people, in churches, in organizational structure, among his/her peers, in his/her own makeup, in his/her family relationships, to mention but a few. Undoubtedly some are more "gifted" than others in this regard, but the finding of humor is not dissimilar to the classic Thomas Edison definition of

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<sup>12</sup>See Robert Lewis Taylor, W. C. Fields, His Follies and Fortunes (New York: Doubleday, 1949).



genius: "(It) is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration." One has to work at it, and hard.

Even if comic aptitude is as genetically determined as musicality, the man who becomes a full-fledged humorous genius, like the man who becomes a proficient composer, will have labored long and hard to refine, polish, cultivate, and expand his natural gift.<sup>13</sup>

There is also a sense in which the preacher must stand apart from the mainstream of life and analyze various situations and events with detachment and objectivity--if he/she is to develop any expertise in humor. He/she may have to go to the extreme Mindess suggests:

If we fit in perfectly with any group, we lop off a branch of our sense of humor. To enable it to flourish, we must remain iconoclasts at heart. Nothing sacred! that is the motto to which we must subscribe.<sup>14</sup>

Humor must be seen apart from the familiar and commonplace, and nothing must be considered so sacred that it cannot be touched with humor. Otherwise it may smack of superstition or idolatry. Even God then, in this respect, can be brought into our humor. One story that includes God and faith-healing may serve as an example:

It was reported that Oral Roberts had died and gone to heaven. One of St. Peter's assistants asked his name. "Oral Roberts," he said.

"Not the Oral Roberts?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

The angel ran to get Peter. "Are you really Oral Roberts?" Peter asked.

"Of course."

Peter disappeared. In a moment he was back. "Come with me," he said.

They arrived at the Great White Throne. "He has decided to see you right away. It's highly irregular."

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<sup>13</sup>Mindess, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

He stood next before God himself. "You are certain you are Oral Roberts?" God asked.

"Yes, I am . . . your Majesty."

"Well," God said, putting his hand to the back of his neck, "I've had this nagging pain in the back of my neck for some time . . ."

This may be inappropriate for some but it was reported that Roberts enjoyed it very much!

How does one tell a humorous story?

A good story is a kind of one-act play, every detail helping to propel the story to its curtain. The details that too many storytellers lay on for atmosphere tend to slow the story down. The best story contains not one wasted word.

Be sure the details of the story are clear, including the proper names when needed. Fuzzy phrases like "such and such," "so and so," "one thing led to another," are very distracting. Any details that do not bear directly on the story, that do not help advance it to its conclusion, should be edited out. But those that remain should be remembered exactly so that, in telling the story, you would never have to fumble for a word, a phrase, a name."<sup>15</sup>

There is an art to telling a humorous story. Such elements as timing, accuracy, no wasted words or phrases, memorizing the "punch line," manifesting self-confidence, are all-important.

Self-confidence is especially important. The individual who says "I cannot tell a humorous story" probably cannot. Among other things he/she lacks the self-confidence to do so. The humorist must not only be in control of every detail of the story, but more importantly--of himself/herself.

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<sup>15</sup>Larry Adler, Jokes and How to Tell Them (New York: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 14-15.

Max Eastman makes another point regarding the telling of a humorous story: "The first law of humor is that things can be funny only when we are in fun."<sup>16</sup> That may appear self-evident, often it is not. There is a decided psychological frame of mind that must precede the telling of a humorous story--on the speaker's part. It requires sharpness of mind, a commanding presence, self-confidence, and as Eastman says: "When we are in fun."

Charles Reynolds Brown makes an interesting observation about humor in preaching:

Humor must naturally be used sparingly, ever so sparingly, but where it is used with discretion and in proper proportions it serves to enlist and to hold attention where the interest of the people begins to lag. It calls them back to think again with more avidity upon the serious ideas which are being presented.

The employment of delicate humor occasionally will rest and refresh an audience. The smile which plays across a congregation of people enables their minds to unbend from the strains of serious and sustained mental effort.<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of the parish ministry, he says:

(Humor) will carry you through many a troubled situation in your parish experience. Cherish it and cultivate it. And when the way is open for a bit of humor to make your presentation of truth more complete, more interesting, more effective, allow it to have its day in court. In humor also is one of "the good gifts of our God."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1936), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Charles Reynolds Brown, The Art of Preaching (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 136.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

### D. The Sensitivity of Humor

Humor has certain sensitivity areas. In the words of James Feibleman: "Comedy is a game but an extremely hazardous one, for like all art 'it is a matter of dancing on the edge of the abyss or hiding it with flowers.'"<sup>19</sup> The user of humor must exercise caution, even extreme caution, not to offend, ostracize, or otherwise embarrass the audience. His/her use of ethnic humor, for instance, should be carefully considered and never used to demean-- rather to enhance. Any other use of ethnic humor will return to haunt the teller. The day of the minstrel is seemingly past, at least for the moment. If, and when, it should return it will likely be in another format.

Public speaking requires sensitivity and integrity, especially for the preacher. This is especially true in his/her use of humor.

One sensitive to persons will not use humor to degrade. Often racial or cultural jokes have sought to belittle someone else, degrade others or, to make them unacceptable. Humor can be delicate and delightful but it can also be crude and inappropriate. The sensible speaker is also sensitive. He or she keeps sensitivity antennae high enough to sense out his group. The responsible speaker uses humor with integrity. If in doubt it's probably better not to!<sup>20</sup>

In a somewhat different vein Harvey Mindess reminds us of a different sensitivity area humor may fall into:

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<sup>19</sup>Feibleman, p. 272.

<sup>20</sup>Helen and Larry Eisenberg, The Public Speaker's Handbook of Humor (New York: Association Press, 1967), p. 31.

The person whose (humor) is consistently sarcastic is, in all probability, engaged in working off an accumulation of resentful feelings. Apparently he harbors a cargo of anger which he is attempting to unload.<sup>21</sup>

Such humor is not healthy but borders on sickness. The preacher who will chastise his/her congregation with sarcastic humor is revealing more about himself/herself than the congregation. There may be a place for levity in a too-serious situation in which a congregation may be involved, but if that levity comes through as sarcasm the minister will lose his/her opportunity to bring humor to the healing process.

Regarding the distinction between comedy and tragedy Feibleman tells us that "comedy is an intellectual affair and deals chiefly with logic. Tragedy is an emotional affair and deals chiefly with value."<sup>22</sup> It was Horace Walpole who once said that "life is a comedy to the man who thinks and a tragedy to the man who feels." Most of us, however, both feel and think interchangeably and deal with life in its totality. Walpole's statement would apply primarily to the man or woman who polarizes the two.

Feibleman suggests that there is a sense in which humor and emotion are incompatible. He states that indifference is humor's natural environment, or at least the absence of deep emotion. Noel Coward, for one, proves him wrong<sup>23</sup> as does many a skillful preacher. In keeping with

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<sup>21</sup>Mindess, p. 175.

<sup>22</sup>Feibleman, p. 199.

<sup>23</sup>Noel Coward, Cavalcade (London: Heinemann, 1932), pp. 54-5 (as an example).

Feibleman's logic he would have to say that humor is out of place during a serious illness or during a funeral service. However, there are those who have used humor effectively at funeral services, myself included. There are some individuals who have lived such joyous, humorous lives that humor can, and should be, a part of their memorial service.

I recall a situation in one of my churches involving the death of a woman who was known for her unique sense of humor. She was aware that she had a very bad heart--she narrowly escaped death several times. She told me on one occasion that her next attack would probably be her last and I should be ready for a funeral on a moment's notice. I suggested she show some consideration and avoid the busy seasons of the year, such as Christmas and Easter. She died on Christmas Day! During her service I related the conversation I had had with her and looking upward I said, "Lois, you and I have a little matter to discuss when I get up there." The family did not think it inappropriate. Indeed, they expressed appreciation for that and several humorous incidents relating to her life.

Laughter is an excellent antidote to a too-long sustained seriousness or sorrow. It releases the tightly-drawn, emotional "main-spring" and enables the individual to return to a healthy emotion he or she can deal with. The skillful dramatist uses humor in this way. A good example is one we have already referred to--Noel Coward

in his play Cavalcade. The play deals with weighty subject matter: separation through war, drowning at sea, loss of a child, but Coward intersperses elements of humor at precisely the right moment to bring relief to his audience. The skillful preacher can do the same thing. It only becomes insensitive when the timing is not right or the humor is ill-chosen.

There are those who create "pitfalls" for themselves simply by overlooking humor altogether. There are groups, and individuals, who find it difficult to use laughter and remain true to the zealous cause they espouse. Fanatical groups: militants, religious zealots, racial bigots, over-zealous patriots all find it difficult to bring humor into their cause. The reason is that laughter would diminish their adamant stand and possibly dissipate their energies. Such groups and individuals take a very dim view of others laughing at their cause as well. It is tantamount to saying their cause is less than absolute. Dictators are not known for their sense of humor, nor are many who give blind, irrational credence to a dogmatic stand.

I would agree with Jakob Jonsson when he writes:

The humorist is broadminded and tolerant, optimistic and hopeful, even if the situation is tragic, the outlook bad and the matter he is concerned with serious. (He) is not indifferent to life or ignorant of the seriousness and importance of the battle which human beings must fight, but the struggle will be looked upon as a game from the point of view of one who definitely believes that nothing of true or everlasting value will, after all, be destroyed. He will

feel happy about the fact that failure is not a sign of fatal disaster. What Hoffding calls the sense of contact or sense of unity with the "stream of values" which always will break through all hindrances, is the expression of his fundamental philosophical conviction.<sup>24</sup>

I think it was Charles Reynolds Brown who once suggested that humor is akin to philosophy in that both get the elements of a situation back into proper perspective. Both look at life from the aspect of eternity as opposed to the temporal. In such a manner the mind remains unperturbed by many of the excitements which rage and pass. It was in this manner that Jesus used humor. He looked at the pretension and anxiety of our lives in the light of the Kingdom of God, and many things appeared humorous: the rich fool, the builder who had no plan, the rich man attempting to get into heaven with his wealth. We would do well to adopt Jesus' attitude toward the temporal and the eternal.

There is something rather remarkable in the fact that man can laugh at all in this "semi-tragic" world. We live in a world full of pain, misery, starvation, disease, crime, war and death. Who can be so audacious as to laugh? Yet, strangely enough, the world rings with laughter. Against the cry of agony is another cry--the laugh of defiance. I found the words of A. Powell Davies particularly meaningful in this regard:

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<sup>24</sup> Jakob Jonsson, Humour and Irony in the New Testament (Reykjavik: Bokautgafa Menningarsjòðs, 1965), p. 25.



On a tiny speck of dust called earth, lost in the cold immensities of mindless and unknowing space, there lives the creature of the flickering moment, this oddity, this little thing, this less than nothing known as man. He knows the shortness of the moment, how brief the day is and how long the night. And yet he laughs. His laughter ripples through the universe. Is it insanity? The frenzy of the thwarted, the madness of the doomed?

Not this laughter! this saving, wholesome, laughter. Man did not invent it. He did not improvise it. He was born with it. He found it in his comprehension, the mystery of it in his soul. Whatever made man made laughter, too. Whatever is the ultimate nature of reality, laughter comes out of it, laughter laughs back at it, laughter laughs with it, laughter defies whatever stands against it. It can do so because--no matter what the contradictions, the want of understanding, the fears and doubts--somewhere at the heart of things, confidence dwells. Confidence strong enough to laugh. Confidence that knows its own victory. Confidence that knows itself to be invincible. Confidence that is God. Laughter is the challenge, the promise of the spirit's supremacy, the courage of the world's new morning, vanquishing forever the receding dark.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Douglas, pp. 213-4

## Chapter 2

### THE RHETORIC OF HUMOR

In this chapter we shall consider the contribution of the early Greek and Roman writers and orators in regard to the rhetoric of humor. We shall then move to contemporary speech theorists and their interpretation. We shall concern ourselves chiefly with the function and purpose of humor in public speaking, and ascertain as nearly as possible the functions of humor stated or implied in the early and later rhetoricians.

#### A. The Greek Rhetoricians

In the case of the early Greek writers we shall have to exercise restraint in reading into their thought since most did not concern themselves with the function of humor in public speaking. They were more concerned with the philosophy or interpretation of humor (comedy). Inasmuch as Plato, Aristotle and others were the first recorded rhetoricians to write on humor it is understandable that they might not have developed theories as to its functions or purposes in the early stages. Humor itself had scarcely been born. It has been implied that comedy was the invention of the Greeks:

Comedy, like tragedy, is a Greek word, and so far as any people can claim to have invented the two modes (tragedy and comedy) the Athenians must be given the credit; but clearly they are natural activities of man

not invented by anyone but arising out of the quality of the human mind.<sup>1</sup>

Northrop Frye cautions against making too much distinction between comedy and tragedy, as if they were the only two modes of dramatic expression:

Thanks to the Greeks, we can distinguish tragedy from comedy in drama, and so we still tend to assume that each is the half of drama that is not the other half. When we come to deal with such forms as the masque, opera, movie, ballet, puppet-play, mystery-play, morality, *commedia dell' arte*, and *Zauberspiel*, we find ourselves in the position of Renaissance doctors who refused to treat syphilis because Galen said nothing about it.<sup>2</sup>

The history of Greek comedy must begin with the philosophy of Plato. There may have been earlier theories but they are not known. Plato acknowledged the objective existence of the comic but was more concerned with the effect of comedy upon the hearer or observer. "Impotence masquerading as fate" was the essential nature of comedy for Plato. However, simply to be amused by a "power of fate" that turns out to be no power at all was certain to produce an eventual disapproval of comedy, as it did even for Plato. In the *Philebus* he writes:

Ignorance in the powerful is hateful and horrible, because hurtful to others both in reality and in fiction; but powerless ignorance may be reckoned, and in truth is, ridiculous.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Leonard J. Potts, Comedy (New York: Capricorn, 1966), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Plato, Philebus 48-50.

There are comparatively few references to humor in Plato, and all of them treat it as the exposure of real impotence behind the "appearance of power." He feels we, in a sense, betray our better selves by succumbing to the temptation of humor:

There are jests which you would be ashamed to make yourself, and yet when you hear them in comedy, or in prose, you are greatly amused by them, and are not at all disgusted by their unseemliness. The case of pity is repeated: there is a principle in human nature which is disposed to raise a laugh, and this which you once restrained by reason, because you were afraid of being thought a buffoon, is now let out again. . . .<sup>4</sup>

In his later works Plato pretended to an extremely low estimate of comedy, holding that it was fit only for "slaves and strangers":

It is necessary also to consider and know uncomely persons and thoughts, and those which are intended to produce laughter in comedy and have a comic character in respect of style, song and dance, and all of the imitations which these afford; for serious things cannot be understood with laughable things, nor opposites at all without opposites, if a man is really to have intelligence of either. But he cannot carry out both in action, if he is to have any degree of virtue. And for this reason he should learn them both, in order that he may not in ignorance do or say anything which is ridiculous and out of place. He should command slaves and hired strangers to imitate such things, but he should never take any serious interest in them himself, nor should any freeman or freewoman be discovered taking pain to learn them. And there should always be some element of novelty in the imitation. Let these, then, be laid down, both in law and in our discourse, as the regulations of laughable amusements which are generally called comedy.<sup>5</sup>

Such an opinion seemed to have been dictated more

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<sup>4</sup>Plato, Republic 10. 606.

<sup>5</sup>Plato, Laws, 7. 816-7.

by political requirements than anything else. Plato gave great importance to the holding of power in its physical sense (he elsewhere defined being itself as power), and since comedy was to be the revelation of impotence behind a pretended power (which we have already mentioned)--it could not be discovered in the leaders of the state. Neither was it to be treated seriously by anyone except in plainest jest and then only by inferior persons.

Plato would lay down strict laws in the State regarding comic writers:

Do we admit into our State the comic writers who are so fond of making mankind ridiculous, if they attempt in a good-natured manner to turn the laugh against our citizens? Or do we . . . allow a man to make use of ridicule in jest and without anger about anything or person? . . . We forbid. . . . But we have still to say who are to be sanctioned or not to be sanctioned by the law in the employment of innocent humor. A comic poet, or maker of iambic or satirical lyric verse, shall not be permitted to ridicule any of the citizens, either by word or likeness, either in anger or without anger. And if one is disobedient, the judges shall either at once expel him from the country, or he shall pay a fine of three minae, which shall be dedicated to the god who presides over the contests. Those only who have received permission shall be allowed to write verses at one another, but they shall be without anger and in jest; in anger and in serious earnest they shall not be allowed. The decision of this matter shall be left to the superintendent of the general education of the young, and whatever he may license the writer shall be allowed to produce, and whatever he rejects let not the poet himself exhibit or ever teach anybody else, slave or freeman, under the penalty of being dishonored and held disobedient to the laws.<sup>6</sup>

In Plato's theory we see that comedy is closely related to tragedy, with this difference: tragedy has

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., II. 935-6.

the power to make good its threat while comedy becomes the avoidance of the terrible outcome, or in the fact that power is not what at first it appeared to be.

Plato's theory amounts in effect to the exposure of contradictions in actuality, and thus indirectly to the demand for a better state of affairs. Where tragedy deals with the substance of power, comedy is more concerned with contradictions revealed in the form of the absence of power. Thus tragedy is largely an affair of feeling, the feeling of the inexorable power of fate, while comedy is largely an intellectual affair, being concerned with the issue of logical contradictions.<sup>7</sup>

Oddly enough, the Symposium itself is one grand comedy--in the highest sense of the word--and ranks in the highest order of the Greek classics.

The next step brings us to the extreme limit of social comedy, the Symposium, the structure of which is, as we should expect, clearest in Plato, whose Socrates is both teacher and lover, and whose vision moves toward an integration of society in a form like that of the Symposium itself, the dialectic festivity which, as is explained in the opening of the Laws, is the controlling force that holds society together. It is easy to see that Plato's dialogue form is dramatic and has affinities with comedy and mime; and while there is much in Plato's thought that contradicts the spirit of comedy as we have outlined it, it is significant that he contradicts it directly, tries to kidnap it, so to speak.<sup>8</sup>

Plato, ironically, transcends his own definition of comedy.

When we consider Aristotle's view of comedy we find that he is not far removed from Plato. He desired primarily to remove the slur which Plato had placed on comedy by considering it fit only for slaves and hired strangers.

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<sup>7</sup>James Feibleman, In Praise of Comedy (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), p. 77.

<sup>8</sup>Frye, p. 286.

Laughter for Aristotle is a form for the base or ugly;

Comedy is an imitation of persons of an inferior moral bent . . . It consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster, an obvious example being the comic mask which is ugly and distorted but not painful.<sup>9</sup>

Aristotle's interest in the psychological effect of comedy shows considerable pre-scientific knowledge of the subject. For instance, he was well aware of the laughter of infants in various stages and under varying conditions, such as tickling. He was also concerned with the arousal of laughter through tickling of adults, especially as it differed with different sensitive areas of the body. He even attempted to guess the probable cause.

Aristotle seemed to have a fuller understanding of the ideal nature of comedy, as opposed to Plato. Its main purpose for him was relaxation and pleasure. It was not to be taken seriously, and for that very reason it was pleasurable and relaxing. It was his understanding that

. . . amusement is a kind of relaxation, and it is because we cannot work forever that we need relaxation. Relaxation, then, is not an end. We enjoy it as a means to activity; but it seems that the happy life is a life of virtue, and such a life is serious--it is not one of mere amusement.<sup>10</sup>

Here is his definition of a "witty" person:

People whose fun is in good taste are called witty ("lively"), a name which implies their happy turns of speech, as these happy turns may be described as movements. But as it is never necessary to look far for the laughable, and as most persons enjoy fun and ridicule more than is necessary, buffoons are also termed

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<sup>9</sup>Aristotle, Poetics 5.

<sup>10</sup>Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, 10. 6.

witty, because they are amusing. But it is clear, from what has been said, that there is a difference, and indeed a wide difference between the two.<sup>11</sup>

On "tact" in humor:

The characteristics of the mean (or "intermediate") state, is tact. A person of tact is one who will use and listen to such language as is suitable to an honorable gentleman; for there is such language as an honorable gentleman may use and listen to in a way of fun, and the fun of a gentleman is different from that of a slavish person, and again, the fun of a cultivated from that of an uncultivated person. The difference may be illustrated from the old comedies as compared with the recent; in the former it was scurrilous ("abusive" or "obscene") language that provided laughter, but in the latter it is more the innuendo . . .<sup>12</sup>

On the comparison of a gentleman with a "buffoon":

Accordingly, this will be the moral state of the refined gentleman; he will be, so to say, a law unto himself. Such, then, is the mean or intermediate character, whether it be called "tactful" or "witty." But the buffoon is the slave of the ludicrous; he will spare neither himself nor others, if he can raise a laugh; and he will say such things as no person of refinement would utter, and some that the latter will not even listen to.<sup>13</sup>

On the use of "jokes":

Jokes seem to be of some service in debate; Gorgias said that we ought to worst our opponent's earnestness with laughter, and his laughter with earnestness--a good saying. The various kinds of laughter have been analysed in the Poetics. Some of these befit a free man and others do not; one must take care, then, to choose the kind of joke that suits one. Irony is more liberal (or "refined") than buffoonery; the ironical man jests for his own amusement, the buffoon for the amusement of another.<sup>14</sup>

Aristotle went much further in the understanding of comedy than did Plato. It was his conviction that comedy

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 4. 13.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 4. 13-14.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 4. 14.

<sup>14</sup>Aristotle, Rhetoric, 3. 18.



causes pleasure which in turn serves a serious purpose. He would make comedy a necessary and acceptable art if only for the purpose of making life more bearable.

Before we leave the contribution of the Greek orators to the theory and practice of comedy perhaps we ought to see their contribution in its historical setting:

The Athenians found that tragedy was inadequate to express their national life, and in the course of time they included a complementary art-form in their dramatic festivals. In its primitive origins comedy is as old and goes as deep as tragedy; but it is more irreverent and it was slower to win official recognition. It is to the credit of the Athenians that by the middle of the fifth century comedy had taken its place by the side of tragedy. The range of Aristophanes is as wide as that of Aeschylus, but his spirit and tendency are utterly different, though obviously a manifestation of the same age and locality. Greek comedy went on developing long after the development of Greek tragedy was complete; and again it served as a model for the Romans (Plautus and Terence) and they in turn served as models for our Elizabethan dramatists. And so onwards, to Moliere and Mr. Bernard Shaw.<sup>15</sup>

What can we say are the main functions of humor for Plato and Aristotle as we have outlined their thoughts? Perhaps for both it would be the avoidance of the ludicrous and unseemly. This would apply as much to our generation as to theirs, and certainly to the preacher who makes use of humor. Both would tell us it is ethically unacceptable to demean another person or race, to major upon their weaknesses and perhaps idiosyncrasies, or to place ourselves in a position of superiority to judge them. They

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<sup>15</sup>Potts, p. 13.

would also tell us not to demean ourselves, though in modern-day parlance most comedians find this to be one of the "safest" forms of humor.

We should be further aware of the language we use, even in humor. We should be unlike the "buffoon" who will "say such things as no person of refinement would utter, and some that the latter will not even listen to."

We cannot press the statements of Plato or Aristotle too far for we are dealing with two entirely different societies and ages. We do not want to assume some of the "better than thou" philosophy that crept into the thought of Plato and Aristotle, but we can analyze their statements in a twentieth century context and accept them for what they are worth. It is fair to say that both were considerably ahead of their time and wrote in universal tones.

#### B. The Roman Rhetoricians

Let us look now at two Roman rhetoricians--Cicero and Quintilian.

The Roman orators emphasized the application of the Greek theories to daily affairs. Seldom did they devote any attention to the development or elaboration of the theories. Cicero, somewhat ahead of his time, said of comedy that it consisted in "cheated expectations." He distinguished between wit and the ludicrous. The difference is one which could be compared to the (equally dangerous)

rapier and bludgeon.<sup>16</sup> Wit concerned itself with positive reform while the ludicrous "lies within the limits of ugliness and a certain deformity."<sup>17</sup> He states that moderation is mainly to be observed in the use of wit: "The whole subject of the ridiculous lies in the moral vices of men who are neither beloved nor miserable, nor deserving to be dragged to punishment for their crimes."<sup>18</sup>

Let us consider what ought to be the main object of investigation in other respects--how far we ought to go. Here we must make it a rule to do nothing insipidly, nor to act like a buffoon. An orator must avoid both extremes; he must not make his jests too abusive nor too buffoonish . . . There are two kinds of humor; one arising from the thing, the other from the subject.<sup>19</sup>

There is no kind of wit in which severe and serious things may not be derived from the subject.<sup>20</sup>

In a classic statement Cicero observes: "Comedy is an imitation of life, a mirror of custom, an image of truth."<sup>21</sup>

In a more detailed section of De Oratore Cicero touches upon the five points for investigation into comedy: 1) what it is; 2) whence it arises; 3) whether it behoves the orator to provoke laughter; 4) to what extent; 5) what

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<sup>16</sup>Feibleman, p. 89.

<sup>17</sup>Cicero, De Oratore, 2. (58) 235.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 2. (58) 235.      <sup>19</sup>Ibid., 2. (58) 235.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 2. (58) 235.

<sup>21</sup>Lane Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), p. 91.

are the several species of the ridiculous. He dismisses the first two points quickly by saying he has no interest or real information on them and "let Democritus explain all that." On the third point, however, he makes this observation: "But, to the third point, it is evidently an orator's business to provoke a laugh . . . above all because it softens and unbends sorrow and severity . . ." <sup>22</sup>

Edmund Bergler makes this comment on both Cicero and Quintilian and their contribution to comedy:

Cicero stresses that the defeat of expectations causes laughter, and sums up: "For it is by deceiving expectation, by satirizing the character of others, by making merry of our own, by comparing a thing with the worse, by pretending, by talking seeming nonsense, and by reproving follies that laughter is stimulated." Confirming Cicero, Quintilian adds that laughter arises from surprise or defeated expectation, and from twisting another's words to express a meaning he did not intend. In short, both Cicero and Quintilian are purely descriptive; their psychological contribution is a shrug of a toga-draped shoulder. <sup>23</sup>

Quintilian, the Roman critic, made one notable observation on the subject of laughter not made by his contemporaries or predecessors. He stated that the impulse to laughter is a tyrannical one which most persons utterly lack the power to resist:

It bursts forth in people not seldom against their will, and forces expression not merely through voice and features, but shakes the whole body with its vigour. <sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Cicero, De Oratore, 2. (58) 235.

<sup>23</sup>Edmund Bergler, Laughter and the Sense of Humor (New York: Intercontinental Medical Book, 1956), p. 3.

<sup>24</sup>Cooper, p. 93.

As such it was even known to "change the tendency of the greatest affairs."<sup>25</sup>

As an example of Quintilian's use of wit, we lift up this historical example from Irene Nye:

According to Quintilian, Gabba happened at one time to be living in a house with a leaky roof. A friend asked for the loan of his raincoat and he answered: "I can't accommodate you, for I'm going to stay at home today."<sup>26</sup>

Quintilian was careful so far as possible to protect the privileged classes from base humor. But for the "humbler class of mankind" he encouraged more licence. He would make free use of comedy (humor) in oratory, as did Cicero, primarily to entertain and to "soften up his audience."

It is interesting to note how far back some classic humor goes. In an article "Humor Repeats Itself" we hear again from Irene Nye:

While a man is waiting for his wife to add the finishing touches to her toilet, he very seldom finds it much of a joke. But when he looks back to it afterward, or when he is commenting on the way of women in general, or especially when it is some other man whose experience is under discussion, it seems to him very funny indeed. Men have loved to dwell on this extremely humorous factor in human life from time immemorial, and the Romans were no more the inventors of that joke than ourselves. "We speak of the man of the hour. Is there also a woman of the hour, I wonder?" "No, it takes her an hour and a half," says a recent magazine. "You know the ways of women; while they are getting ready, while they are starting, it is a year," wrote Terence, a hundred years before Cicero. Still earlier Plautus

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<sup>25</sup>Feibleman, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup>Irene Nye, "Humor Repeats Itself," Classical Journal, IX:4 (January 1914), 162.

harped on the same theme: "Surely woman was born from Delay herself," he says.<sup>27</sup>

While we are on the general topic of ancient humor perhaps we ought to include one other from the Greek anthology:

In the epigram of Lucilius we may recognize the original of the limerick ANENT:

the young lady of Lynn,  
Who was so exceedingly thin  
That when she essayed  
To drink lemonade  
She slipped through the straw--and fell in.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps we would do well to contemplate the words of Irene Nye if we think our generation has a corner on originality in humor: "Puns, sarcasm and irony, practical jokes, picturesque slang and humorous situations arising from misunderstanding, self-conceit, mistaken identity, gullibility, intoxication, Christmas presents passed on, guests who outstay their welcome, men who are afraid of their wives, extravagant sons and angry fathers--all these amused the Romans years ago."<sup>29</sup>

What can we say about the contribution of Cicero and Quintilian to the function of humor? It would appear to be still within the category of the early Greek orators with the possible exception of Cicero's statement that the

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>28</sup>Joseph William Hewitt, "The Humor of the Greek Anthology," Classical Journal, XV11:2 (November 1921), 75.

<sup>29</sup>Nye, p. 164.

use of humor "softens and unbends sorrow and severity." Every minister who makes use of humor in sermons knows the value of humor in this respect. Humor can take the sting out of sorrow and certainly softens severity.

Cicero, among others, speaks of the three functions of the orator: to please, to instruct, and to persuade. Humor could play an important role in pleasing an audience, thereby making it easier to instruct and to persuade.

Elder Olson makes an interesting distinction, historically, between the various commentators on humor-- a distinction we would do well to consider: He divides all such commentators into three basic categories: 1) those dealing with the problem of the comic, or the ridiculous, or the ludicrous (all of which he uses synonymously) in terms of what is laughed at; 2) who does the laughing; and 3) some relation between the object of laughter and the subject who laughs. All of these, he says, are concerned with why we laugh, but they differ in what they appeal to as the cause:

Plato, for example, belongs to the first group, if we take literally what he says in the *Philebus*. The ridiculous is a form of evil--the kind due to one's manifest self-ignorance with respect either to one's possessions or person or soul; provided that one is weak and unable to retaliate when slighted, since otherwise he would be hateful and formidable. (Aristotle's remark in *Poetics* 4 at least sounds very much like this, though we must discuss it another time: the ridiculous is a "species of the painlessly or harmlessly ugly or base.") Cicero, too, belongs here, along with the many later writers who adopted his doctrine of the ridiculous as a "certain baseness or deformity (*turpitude et deformitas*) as defects in the characters of men not in universal esteem, nor in calamitous circumstances, nor . . . deserving to be

dragged to punishment for their crimes." Bergson, with his theory of laughter as arising from the "mechanical encrusted on the living," belongs there as well.

The second group, who look for the cause of laughter in the one who laughs, find it in mind or body or both. We may restrict our discussion to the first of these. Hobbes, with his view of laughter as "sudden glory"--that is sudden rejoicing in one's superiority to another; Kant, with his view that it arises "from a strained expectation reduced suddenly to nothing"; Schopenhauer's "incongruity of sensuous and abstract knowledge," Baudelaire, who sees laughter as stemming from a fault, not in the object of laughter, but in the one who laughs--indeed, it is for him a consequence of Original Sin and the Fall of Man; Hazlitt, with his theory of a pleasant disappointment in trifles; Freud, with his "economy of expenditure" and "suppressed infantilism"--all of these belong here.

Finally, we have those who find the cause of laughter in some relation between the object of laughter and the laugher; thus, to cut the list short, Jean Paul Richter, who sees the ridiculous as founded upon the three ingredients of objective contrast, physical circumstance, and subjective contrast, and Theodor Lipps, who sees it as an objective pretense of greatness belied by a subjective realization of insignificance.<sup>30</sup>

This does not touch upon the "function of humor" as such, but it does give a helpful overview of the writers on humor from the earliest times to the present.

Eric Auerbach in Mimesis points out the distinct break with classical antiquity with the advent of the Christian era. Speaking of the "common man" as distinguished from the "privileged class" of traditional antiquity, he writes:

A tragic figure (Jesus) from such a background, a hero of such weakness, who yet derives the highest

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<sup>30</sup>Elder Olson, The Theory of Comedy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 5-7



force from his very weakness, such a to and fro of the pendulum, is incompatible with the sublime style of classical antique literature. But the nature and the scene of the conflict also fall entirely outside the domain of classical antiquity. Viewed superficially, the thing is a police action and its consequences; it takes place entirely among everyday men and women of the common people; anything of the sort could be thought of in antique terms only as farce or comedy. Yet why is it neither of these? Why does it arouse in us the most serious and most significant sympathy? Because it portrays something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life, which thus assumes an importance it could never have assumed in antique literature. What we witness is the awakening of a "new heart and a new spirit."<sup>31</sup>

With the advent of the Christian movement a new "joy" was ushered into the world. Individuals whom had formerly been ignored, demeaned, ostracized acquired "status" unknown and unexperienced before. The implications of this radical social transformation are far-reaching. It touches our lives today. Would there be any "humor" in the world today, particularly among the so-called "common men" (and women) if the Christian era had never dawned upon the world?

The true heart of the Christian doctrine--Incarnation and Passion--was . . . totally incompatible with the principle of the separation of styles. Christ had not come as a hero and king but as a human being of the lowest social station. His first disciples were fishermen and artisans; he moved in the everyday milieu of the humble folk of Palestine; he talked with publicans and fallen women, the poor and the sick and children. Nevertheless, all that he did and said was of the highest and deepest dignity, more significant

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<sup>31</sup>Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 42-3.

than anything else in the world. The style in which it was presented possessed little if any rhetorical culture in the antique sense; it was sermo piscatorius and yet it was extremely moving and much more impressive than the most sublime rhetorico-tragical literary work. And the most moving account of all was the Passion. That the King of Kings was treated as a low criminal, that he was mocked, spat upon, whipped, and nailed to the cross--that story no sooner comes to dominate the consciousness of the people than it completely destroys the aesthetics of the separation of styles; it engenders a new elevated style, which does not scorn everyday life and which is ready to absorb the sensorily realistic, even the ugly, the undignified, the physically base.<sup>32</sup>

### C. Later Rhetoricians

There is obviously a considerable difference of emphasis on humor as perceived by its early exponents and as perceived today. It will now be our concern to focus attention upon those commentators on humor in the twentieth century, putting particular emphasis upon the function of humor as perceived by modern speech theorists. We might do well to divide such functions into positive and negative, for humor can serve both purposes.

Harvey Mindess would remind us of one of the most important positive aspects of humor:

When we laugh together, we all feel closer to one another. Like affectionate physical contact, laughing at the same things brings us more in touch with each other than intellectual agreement. Our sense of humor roots deeper than our reasoning ability, so sharing it gives us a feeling communion at the level of our basic needs.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>33</sup>Harvey Mindess, Laughter and Liberation (Los Angeles: Nash, 1971), p. 188.

With all that tends to separate us (personality conflicts, social status, theological differences, educational backgrounds, ethnic polarization, etc.) we need to avail ourselves of whatever unifying force may be available.

Fortunately, humor is one.

Martin Grotjahn suggests another positive attribute:

Everything done in laughter helps us to be more human. Laughter is a way of human communication which is essentially and exclusively human. It can be used to express an unending variety of emotions. It is based on guilt-free release of aggression, and any release makes us perhaps a little better and more capable of understanding one another, ourselves, and life. What is learned with laughter is learned well. Laughter gives freedom, and freedom gives laughter. He who understands the comic begins to understand humanity and the struggle from freedom and happiness.<sup>34</sup>

Freedom is, and should be, our perennial quest. If, as Grotjahn suggests, "laughter gives freedom and freedom gives laughter," it ought to be pursued with all diligence. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32) Such freedom must include freedom from self, that hyper-critical self that robs us of a healthy attitude toward life. Jesus was aware of our tendency toward self-condemnation and termed such a tendency "foolish." He thereby might put the situation in a humorous perspective. The "woman taken in adultery" is a case in point. Jesus certainly did not condone her action but he put it in proper perspective. "Where are those thine accusers?" (A moment ago a murderous crowd surrounded her)

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<sup>34</sup>Martin Grotjahn, Beyond Laughter (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), p. VIII (Preface).

"Hath no man condemned thee?" is a mildly humorous way of releasing the woman from crushing guilt. "Go and sin no more" is far more therapeutic than "Let her be condemned."

Humor does give freedom. It puts our guilt feelings in their proper perspective. One of the characteristics of the Christian life (according to Jesus) is abiding joy and "peace that passes understanding." Remorseful guilt is hardly conducive to that kind of spirit. The ability to laugh at oneself is a sign of mental and spiritual health.

Webster says, "They who laugh alike begin to think alike."<sup>35</sup> It is not desirable or necessary for all of us to think alike, but in the matter of unwarranted guilt we could use a great deal more feeling of equanimity.

Elder Olson speaks of the necessity to joke about certain matters as opposed to taking them too seriously, to maintain one's equilibrium. He makes specific mention of Jewish anthologies:

I looked over a number of anthologies of Jewish jokes and found to my astonishment that a great many dealing with Russian or Nazi persecutions of the Jews were fairly contemporary with such persecutions. I was puzzled by this until I saw that this was perfectly consistent with my hypothesis; that they had to laugh or else to weep, and they had had enough weeping; they could master their nightmare only by laughing at it. Similarly, jokes about war and soldiery seem to spring up in times of war; and the same principle seems to account for the fact that religious, ethnic, or national jokes, as well as jokes about social taboos, greatly outnumber the jokes of pure fun; they seem to

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<sup>35</sup> Gary Webster, Laughter in the Bible (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1960), p. 35.

indicate our need to take lightly things that otherwise we might take far too seriously.<sup>36</sup>

The Jews, possibly more than any other people, have possessed the rare quality of being able to laugh at themselves--even in tragic circumstances. The Rabbis, for instance, made much use of humor in the Talmud as far back as Cicero. That has to be the mark of genius. Consider the following, written by a Jew:

The beloved Rabbi lay upon his deathbed. His devoted disciples were gathered about him. One close to him leaned over and whispered, "Rabbi, give us your last words . . ." In a feeble voice the Rabbi said, "Life . . . life is a river . . ."

Starting with the first it was passed down the line, "The Rabbi says 'Life is a river' . . . 'Life is a river . . .' They were lined up from the most scholarly to the least. When the phrase reached the least he scratched his head and said, "What does the Rabbi mean, 'Life is a river'?" Up the line came the question, "What does the Rabbi mean, 'Life is a river'?" . . . When it finally reached the one standing by the Rabbi, he leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Someone wants to know what you mean by 'Life is a river. . . .'"

The old Rabbi raised his head slightly and with a wave of the hand, said, "So, . . . maybe it's not a river . . .?"

One of the reasons for the popularity of the current television series "All in the Family," is its ability to look at some serious matters humorously. It flaunts most of our social taboos, including racial intolerance and bigotry, social inequality, religious idiosyncrasies, sexual taboos, and makes us laugh at our own inconsistencies. While not an avid viewer of the series I would say it is a far better approach than a series of serious

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<sup>36</sup>Olson, pp. 39-40.

discourses on the same subject matter--including some moralizing from the pulpit I have heard.

So, then, we can say that one of the positive functions of humor is to make us laugh at what we might otherwise take far too seriously. Certainly such an approach is to be preferred to the deluge of "guilt feelings" heaped upon us in programming, press, periodicals, and pulpits.

While speaking in broader terms than the pulpit the following comment on humor serves as one of its positive functions:

How frequently a joke can catch, better than a dozen treatises, the essence of a people, a period, an entire civilization. The world's collective wisdom, we might fairly contend, is compressed into its jokes, which are teeming granaries of human folly and conceit, credulity and presumption.<sup>37</sup>

What humorous stories or phrases will characterize our age? We can be sure that some creative humorist will capture the essence of our age in a cryptic sentence or phrase, or a humorous story. One thinks immediately of several cryptic sentences that have captured the ages past: Caesar's famous dictum: "I found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble." "Nero fiddled while Rome burned." "I came, I saw, I conquered." One thinks of Alexander sitting on a hillside weeping bitter tears because he had no further worlds to conquer. We all know

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<sup>37</sup>Joyce O. Hertzler, Laughter (New York: Exposition Press, 1970), p. 13.

what is meant by "He has met his Waterloo." Perhaps our generation is the first to add a sequel to that: "He has met his Watergate."

I suspect every congregation has a cryptic, descriptive sentence of each of their pastors, and what pastor does not have a descriptive sentence about each of his churches?

There may be one certain phrase in a sermon that will crystalize the whole meaning for the congregation. Sometimes it is the title of the message. Perhaps it will be a humorous story. Wise (and fortunate) is that preacher who can create such a descriptive sentence or find such a humorous story.

Another function of humor is that of reserved ridicule. In the words of James Feibleman: "Ridicule . . . pretends to take actuality seriously--too seriously--and by so doing shows that what we have always taken with some seriousness is not worthy of respect at all. In other words it overestimates that which it intends to lower in estimation."<sup>38</sup> At times we take each other too seriously and our inability to live together in peace and harmony. At times we take our own piety too seriously. At other times we take the pessimistic view of man's lack of spiritual and moral progress too seriously. We often have

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<sup>38</sup>Feibleman, p. 179.

occasion to take some radical groups in society too seriously. To illustrate how we might deal with the "bully" in our society the following might serve as an example:

A group of motorcycle bullies were traveling through a small mid-western community and stopped at a diner. They sat down at the counter flanking a truck driver. One of the cyclists proceeded to have a little "fun" with the driver. He took the salt shaker and dumped the contents in the driver's coffee. The driver said nothing.

"Man, is this guy chicken!" He then took half of the driver's sandwich and ate it. Another took his soup and stuffed it with paper napkins. Still the driver said nothing. He got up, left some money on the counter and left.

"What a pansy!" one said. "I never saw a guy so yellow!"

The waitress said, "Not only that but he's a lousy driver. He just ran over four motorcycles as he left."

When using ridicule it is best to allow someone other than yourself to speak to a given situation. That is, quote someone else on a given subject or incident. It is even more effective to quote a statement by the group or individual and let such a statement stand by itself. For instance, allow the Communists to speak for themselves in denying religious freedom to their people. It adds weight to the statement and takes the stigma or judgmental attitude off the speaker.

In a taped interview with Dr. Kenneth A. Carlson (former pastor of First United Methodist Church, Glendale, California) he suggested the following as an important function of humor:

I think (humor) plays an important part in psychological relief during the course of a sermon where you are dealing with, say, heavy material or content. It gives a change of pace: The laws of alternation which



run all through the universe, whether it is the seasons alternating or the day alternating with the night. A boxer always changes his pace as we call it, so does a swimmer, and I think that those of us who are on the public platform likewise have to develop the art of changing pace. Humor is one form of doing that because immediately it will bring a congregation to, or, if their minds are wandering, it brings them back.

Similar comments to Dr. Carlson's were mentioned by several clergymen who were interviewed. Others said "it relieves tension at crucial points in the sermon," "it establishes the minister as a human being, as one who does not take himself too seriously . . . ," "it sharpens the listening and identification with what the speaker is trying to communicate . . . ," "it establishes rapport with your audience . . . ," "it helps people get the proper perspective and allows them to lower their defenses . . . ," "it makes it easier to drive a point home before the mind goes on to weightier matters . . . ," "it lowers resistance to new or unpopular ideas . . . ," "causes us (minister and people) to be closer together."

Others suggested that humor can be a peacemaker. In tense, sometimes heated, board meetings, humor effectively used can relieve tension. Often it can make the difference between lasting animosity and a forgiving spirit. Such humor cannot be prearranged, generally. Often it will be spontaneous and that is its primary value. Had it been given considerable pre-thought it probably would be recognized as such and lose much of its effectiveness.

Dr. Davie Napier, former President of the Pacific School of Religion, suggests that we might even take advantage of a liturgical slip in a service: "Everyone of us in the business knows the occasional liturgical goof. God is better praised by our capitalizing on it, than by the pious attempt to gloss over it. Not all, but most sermons miss the chance to strike a blow for the Kingdom that do not at some point hold up for general laughter some quality of the familiar common life of our time and place." Not all would agree, but it would fit the style of Dr. Napier and others with his style of humor.

The Rev. Ralph Johnson, former pastor of the California Heights United Methodist Church in Long Beach, California, suggests "that humor can be particularly effective if through a humorous story someone in the congregation can say, 'That's me!' or 'That's what I, my boy/wife/husband would have done!' It builds a bridge between the speaker and his audience and establishes common ground upon which both may stand. It also relaxes the speaker as the people are relaxed . . . and the 'main spring' is released temporarily."

We have not dealt thus far with the negative aspect of humor in this chapter, and it would be instructive to recognize the hazards to poorly chosen or poorly used humor. In our first chapter we looked, briefly, at a few "sensitivity" areas. It would probably be instructive to recapitulate them: In the words of James Feibleman, "Comedy is

a game but an extremely hazardous one, for like all art, 'it is a matter of dancing on the edge of the abyss or hiding it with flowers.'" Helen and Larry Eisenberg cautioned against using racial and cultural humor to belittle someone or a group. Harvey Mindess warned us that sarcasm is directed back to the speaker more than it is directed to the audience. We suggested that there are those who handle humor negatively simply by not using it, such as fanatical groups: militants, religious zealots, racial bigots, over zealous patriots, and others. Perhaps here we should mention that ministers may also omit humor from their ministry to their detriment. Such as using it in "strained" board meetings.

The Rev. Ralph Johnson, previously mentioned, had the following negative comment to make about humor:

The way a minister uses humor has to be in keeping with his own personality and his own style of preaching. In other words I think a minister can tell a story, very practically, that another could not use effectively. Much of that would spring from his own innate ability or his own personality. The same story could not necessarily be told by someone else in a different setting and be as effective. It has to be consistent with a person's own style. I have a very strong feeling that a story should not be used in a sermon simply to get laughs. Unless the story makes the point that I want to make more effectively than I think I could make it without the story, I don't want to use it.

Some other comments that were made in taped interviews were: "Avoid the reputation of 'a teller of funny stories,'" "humor in a sermon should not exist for its own sake but to support a thought or idea," "off-color stories or those of questionable moral integrity can raise emotional blocks," "use humor, like salt, sparingly," "no speaker should use humor if he is not comfortable with it."

#### D. Functions of Humor (A Summary)

Perhaps it would be in order now to summarize the functions of humor as stated or implied in this chapter. We will have the opportunity in the next chapter to examine and apply these functions to the humor used by our selected preachers (Bishop Gerald H. Kennedy and Dr. Kenneth A. Carlson).

Plato and Aristotle suggest the following use of humor: (1) avoidance of the ludicrous, (2) never demean another person or race, (3) do not demean yourself (though in modern day parlance Jack Benny or Johnny Carson would have starved to death without self-deprecation), (4) be acutely aware of the language you use. For Cicero and Quintilian (5) humor softens and unbends sorrow and severity.

Moving into contemporary rhetoricians on humor Harvey Mindess suggests (6) when we laugh together we all feel closer to one another. Martin Grotjahn suggests that (7) everything done with laughter helps us to be more human. Gary Webster states that (8) they who laugh alike begin to think alike. Elder Olson suggests (9) that we look at serious matters in a lighter vein to make life more bearable. Joyce Hertzler says that (10) a humorous story can catch, better than a dozen treatises, the essence of a people, a period, an entire civilization. We carried this over into the makeup of a sermon and suggested that a key phrase or humorous story might capture the essence of the entire

message. James Feibleman observes that (11) reserved ridicule is an effective use of humor.

Dr. Kenneth Carlson suggests that humor can (12) give a necessary change of pace to a sermon. Interviewed clergymen said (13) humor relieves tension, (14) establishes the minister as a human being, (15) sharpens the listening, (16) establishes rapport with your audience, (17) allows individuals to lower their defenses, (18) makes it easier to drive home a point, (19) lowers resistance to new or unpopular ideas, (20) makes it possible for minister and people to come closer together, and (21) is used effectively as a peacemaker.

Davie Napier would go so far as to suggest that the minister ought to (22) capitalize on a liturgical goof. Ralph Johnson suggests that humor enables (23) someone in the congregation to identify directly with the humorous story, thus establishing rapport with that individual. He further states that (24) it relaxes the speaker as the people are relaxed. Harvey Mindess warns us (25) not to use sarcasm for it will return to haunt the speaker. Ralph Johnson again suggests that a minister (26) use humor only in keeping with his personality and style of preaching.

Other interviewed clergymen suggested: (27) avoid the reputation of being "a teller of funny stories," (28) humor should never exist for its own sake but solely to support a theme or idea, (29) avoid off-color stories or those of questionable moral integrity, (30) use humor, like salt,

sparingly, and (31) no speaker should use humor unless he feels comfortable with it.

There are undoubtedly other functions of humor, but these should suffice as at least giving us a representative and foundational start.

## Chapter 3

## ANALYSIS OF THE HUMOR OF TWO PREACHERS

## A. Bishop Gerald H. Kennedy

Here we shall analyze several of Bishop Kennedy's sermons as to his use of humor. We shall examine in more detail one of his "Bishop's Laymen's Luncheon" addresses, (held each year in Los Angeles during his episcopacy), and look at two of his books, While I'm On My Feet (an autobiography) and For Preachers and Other Sinners.

We want first of all to look at the background from which he comes.

At forty, Bishop Gerald Hamilton Kennedy was one of the youngest bishops to be elected in the Methodist Church. His background and early life is best sketched in his own words:

There are very few people who know less about their family background than I know about mine. My father was a rolling stone who never stayed anywhere long enough to gather moss or much of anything else. The longest we ever lived in one city was six years, and we moved four times during that period. We came to California from Michigan when I was five years old and the bonds with the past were severed completely. I have some uncles and cousins in the West, but we have not kept up our correspondence.

My mother was born in Vermont, and an old gentleman once told me that her father was remembered for his blunt, salty, and forthright speech. The old gentleman thought I might have inherited some of his qualities. My father's family came down from Canada and somebody told me once that originally they were from the north of Ireland. My father was a local preacher in The Methodist Church and a man who knew very little contentment or peace of mind. Hampered by lack of formal education, he

could never adjust himself to the gap between what he wanted to do and what he was able to do. He was the victim of frustration and sickness.

I think this rootlessness has influenced my life and point of view. When I entered high school, some of my friends who came from good families simply assumed a security and status I never knew. There was a period when I took my lunch away from the school and ate it under an old railroad trestle. This was one of those behavior patterns of adolescence that are so ridiculous to everyone but the adolescent. It was a period of loneliness, bashfulness, withdrawal. At least it saved me from the nostalgia for childhood that haunts so many people, and it gave me a great sympathy for every lonely child.

Things changed rapidly when we moved to a new town and I made a speech in a high-school assembly. A great public-speaking teacher influenced my life by opening up opportunities for speaking contests and debating. I was elected president of the student body and became one of the student leaders. Oscar Levant once said that if a kid could not play baseball, he had no choice but to become a concert pianist. My work after school and in the morning prevented athletics except sporadically, and so there was no choice but to speak. And at last I belonged.<sup>1</sup>

In the previous quotation he mentioned a high school teacher who greatly influenced his life. It is a key to understanding his unique style of preaching, and therefore important to have him amplify this in his own words:

My greatest teacher was Miss Margaret Painter, who taught public speaking and debate at Modesto High School in California. She found me floundering in the the hopes and torments of teen-agedom and made the path straight. After being in her class a few weeks, I knew what I wanted to do. She had the quiet authority of quality and it was unthinkable to give anything less than the best in her class. I remember her saying after a public-speaking contest I won only because of the ineptness of my opponents, "That would have been good enough for some people." I think the highest praise she ever gave me was: "That sounds like you." She compared each person

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<sup>1</sup>Gerald H. Kennedy, While I'm On My Feet (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), pp. 15-16.



with his own potential and she took a very dim view of average performance from students who could do better.<sup>2</sup>

Bishop Kennedy in his speaking and writing was a man of "fierce logic," a habit of mind acquired from debating skills as a young man. His sermons were carefully planned. So was his inclusion of humor. He was a prolific reader, averaging a book a day for the better part of his adult life. He could glance at a page and determine whether there was anything of value on it for him.

As a preacher I find myself reading for a purpose, although it is a very broad one. I read to find material that will enable me to better preach the gospel. Nearly everything is grist for that mill, but it makes a man mighty impatient with abstractions and anything not closely connected with life. Everything has to mean something and it has to be capable of being shared with other men. Theology that cannot be preached is no good. Words, therefore, that are used simply as ends in themselves fail to arouse my enthusiasm because they fail to arouse any response.<sup>3</sup>

His method of sermon preparation was uniquely his own:

I outlined my sermon on Wednesday morning and then talked it through Thursday, Friday, and Saturday mornings. Sunday morning I rarely got involved in other activities, although I broadcast over the radio before my service for several years. Sunday morning was my last chance to meditate on the sermon, although sometimes I am afraid it was merely worrying about it. But I could never be at ease if anything interfered with this schedule, and even when I was traveling, it was kept faithfully. Sometimes it meant getting up pretty early in the morning, but nothing went well unless I followed the routine.<sup>4</sup>

He was a prolific writer with over twenty books to his credit. He was also bishop of one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas of the nation at this same time, with

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 28.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 22.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

numerous administrative duties.

He was generally the first one in his office at Methodist Headquarters in Los Angeles. He often opened the building before the janitor. Some sleepless residents in Kingsley Manor (a retirement home across from Methodist Headquarters) would often look out of their windows in the early morning hours and see a light in the bishop's office.

Time Magazine ran a feature article on Bishop Kennedy in May, 1964, which stated:

Kennedy is certainly not, as he puts it, a "very bishoply bishop." He is far more at home in sports clothes than in the hair shirt of clerical garb. He drives to work in a sports car--currently a white Karmann Ghia Volkswagen, which followed an MG, an Austin-Healey, and a Nash Metropolitan.

. . . . .

During his years in the parish ministry, Kennedy earned church-wide fame as one of Methodism's finest young preachers. "If you keep on talking like that, young man," said Bromley Oxnam after hearing a Kennedy sermon, "you'll end up a bishop." The prophecy was fulfilled one day in July, 1948, when Kennedy was elected one of the four bishops in the Western Jurisdiction. At 40, he was the youngest member of the hierarchy and the first white Methodist bishop ever picked by one jurisdiction from another.<sup>5</sup>

The same article states that Kennedy had "the pace and timing of a Broadway pro." Few would disagree. His note-free delivery of sermons gave him great freedom in the pulpit and excellent eye-contact with his audience. It would be well to hear his own philosophy about this:

Speaking with neither manuscript nor notes doubles the pleasure of the preacher and increases it tenfold

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<sup>5</sup>"Challenge of Future," Time (May 8, 1964), 77.

for the congregation. When I read some fellow's article in a ministerial magazine arguing for the reading of sermons, I wonder if he has ever talked with his laymen. He may convince a few scholarly brothers who would rather be caught undressed than split an infinitive, but I never met a layman who would agree with him. Even an elementary understanding of communication will dispose of his arguments. I tried in vain to open an important pulpit for a sermon-reader, and the committee would not even take the time to go and hear him preach. A man may stubbornly hold to his custom of reading his sermons, but let him never deceive himself to the extent of believing that the people like it.<sup>6</sup>

Kennedy's logical mind moved directly to each of his points which was amply documented with fact, illustration--and often humor. In the words of one who knows him well, and the professor who now occupies the "Gerald H. Kennedy Chair on Preaching" at Claremont School of Theology, Dr. K. Morgan Edwards: "Kennedy used humor for transition or for the introduction of an idea. He often began the introduction of a serious thought with a light touch and moved toward the more serious. Then when he was ready to move to the next idea he would let the audience 'up again' with humor."

Kennedy styled himself as a "simple, Bible-loving Christian," most often in fun. But, in a sense his preaching was simple, profoundly simple. The genius of his ministry was his ability to speak to "the common man." In Edward's words again: "I used to say that he could take a bus driver with a sixth-grade education who didn't know anything about Christianity, have him get off the bus at the curb where Kennedy was preaching, go in and understand everything that

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<sup>6</sup>Kennedy, p. 139.

was said. That is a mark of genius." He fulfilled Bishop Philips Brooks' admonition to every young preacher; not to use words in your message that a twelve year-old could not understand.

It may have delighted Kennedy to play the role of a "simple, Bible-loving Christian," but there were few who could match his well-read mind, his "fierce logic," or his courageous stand on important (and often controversial) issues. As an example of a stand on an important issue (which Kennedy helped to make controversial) Time Magazine in another article quotes his stand on the widely publicized proposal for church union advanced by Eugene Carson Blake and known as the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) or more recently as the "Church of Christ Uniting":

The "ecumaniacs"--as Kennedy calls the extreme partisans of the ecumenical movement--overlook the fact that the bigger the church, the more ponderous the machinery. "It all sounds so spiritual and satisfying until a skeptic begins to think of all the administration involved. Then my feet get chilled. Let us face it: the only way an ecclesiastical institution the size of the Roman Catholic Church can function effectively is to be authoritarian. Is this our goal?"<sup>7</sup>

On another occasion he led a fight to elect some moderates to the Los Angeles conservative-minded school board and ended up being named to the State Board of Education.

One can recall his criticism of the Nixon Administration, a number of local and national politicians, and even his opposition to the "name change" of The Methodist Church

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<sup>7</sup>"Bishop Vs. 'Ecumaniacs'," Time (February 17, 1962), 42.

when plans were nearly complete for the merger with the Evangelical-United Brethren Church. It was not necessary to agree with him always, but it was difficult not to admire his individualism and courageous stands on unpopular issues. Such individualism seems to be fading from the American scene, and we shall be poorer for its loss.

Kennedy, unabashedly, wanted to be "the greatest preacher in the world":

I met a young attorney on his way to his office about the same time each morning. We would stop a moment and greet each other and became friends, although we never spent any time together socially. He belonged to another church but we met at a service club and this was the extent of our friendship . . . He wanted to be the greatest lawyer in the world and I wanted to be the greatest preacher in the world.<sup>8</sup>

He is to be credited for making a solid effort to fulfill his goal. Time Magazine regarded him as "among the four or five most dazzling preachers in the United States today" (1964).<sup>9</sup>

Kennedy preferred to speak to a full auditorium, whether large or small. A full house gave him a needed psychological lift. He identified closely with his audience and they with him. Fortunately, his popular preaching in and of itself most often assured a full house. Time Magazine again said of him: "His language is spare and unchurchy, larded with wit and timely references to the secular world

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<sup>8</sup>Kennedy, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup>"Challenge of Future," p. 74.

around him. Yet his message is always related more to eternal truths than to the morning's headlines."<sup>10</sup>

Before we look in detail at Bishop Kennedy's "Laymen's Luncheon" address (Fall, 1959), let us look at his sermonic humor by way of several of his taped messages. He perhaps used humor more sparingly in his sermons than as an "after-dinner" speaker or on lighter occasions, but his choice of humor was always selective, appropriately spaced, supportive of the point he was making, and relevant to his message.

A sermon entitled "Eternity," which he delivered at First United Methodist Church, Pasadena, July 27, 1969, was the fourth in a series on the four gospels. In his opening statements Kennedy gave a brief overview of the Book of John. After introducing the broad perspective, the supreme revelation of God in Christ, he used a humorous illustration about Albert Einstein:

A man wrote a letter to Albert Einstein one time and asked him if he wouldn't in a few simple words explain the Theory of Relativity. Einstein answered the letter. He said, "I can't do it. But, if you ever come to Princeton call on me and I'll play it for you on my violin."

Then Kennedy says: "Something like that happened with God. 'Make is simple, Lord, then even I can see it.' You can't do it. But, when you see him, I think it'll become plain to you. At least plain enough for you to walk the straight path."

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 77

It is a good illustration, shedding light on an otherwise obscure and difficult question, "How can we know God in his fullness?" It is a typical example of how Kennedy made difficult ideas and thoughts understandable. He had a particular talent (as well as an express desire) to make Christianity practical and illuminating to "the man on the street." He succeeded.

In his next humorous illustration, oddly enough, we have an exception to his normal rule. It really does little to support the point he is trying to make, and one almost feels it is a "favorite story" recalled on the spur of the moment, though that is mere conjecture. He follows it immediately with an illustration that is much more relevant, though not humorous. Here are the humorous (and non-humorous) stories: He is speaking of "the divine breaking into time" ("The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"). He speaks of the "light" that comes on the face of an old man when he remembers an inspiring event in his past, or the light found on the faces of children, and the particular "splendor" that comes to a couple bound closely together in marriage. It is in connection with marriage that he uses the following illustration:

A school boy writing about Christianity said,  
 "Christians believe a man ought to have only one wife.  
 The system is called 'monotony.'"

This, in my judgment does little, if anything, to support his point about "the divine breaking into time," or the "splendor" that is shared by couples in marriage. He

follows it immediately with a much more relevant illustration:

The word I like about this is the word spoken by the French author, Andre Maurois, who said one time: "Marriage is a long conversation that always seems too short." Ah! He had the truth of it!

In analyzing Kennedy's spoken messages I have noticed that his verbal comments take more liberties than his written word. This could be said of any speaker/writer, I'm sure. The written word is exacting while the spoken word is conversational and less exacting. In his later years Kennedy became even less exacting and more conversational in his spoken messages.

In the second division of his message Kennedy speaks of "divinity breaking into the human." He starts immediately with a contemporary illustration:

I looked this past week (I believe it was this past week, wasn't it?) at the television and saw those two men on the moon. Your grandfather would have said "They must be gods! They must be divine! Look what they've done!" They weren't. We know them. We know their names, something about their families. (One of them is a Methodist, Neil Armstrong, thank God!

The last statement concerning Neil Armstrong was an aside, and one cannot be sure Kennedy intended it as part of his original message, but it brought the "common touch" we have been talking about that was so important to Kennedy.

The next illustration is unusually long compared to Kennedy's normal style. Midway in the illustration is a bit of humor (which is our reason for including it). He is speaking further about the "divine breaking into the human":

A few years ago Mary and I were in Israel. We've been there three or four times. Very interesting



country. This was the first time we went there. And I wanted to go down to Cana of Galilee. That's where according to John the first miracle was performed. Jesus turned the water into wine. And I wanted to see that place. So, the driver took us down there. We had some friends along. We got out of the car to walk up to the village to the church they had built on that site. And almost immediately we were surrounded by about, I think, 15 or 20 little kids. Dirtiest, filthiest, little rascals I ever saw in my life. Little peasant kids. Little 8, 9, 10-year old girls carrying baby brothers and sisters on their back. That's the way they got their baby-sitting taken care of in those days, in that village. (Higher pitched voice, more rapid pace) Dirty! I never saw such dirt. I asked Mary how old that little kid over there could be. She said he was about 6. I couldn't believe it! A kid couldn't get that dirty in only six years! It was awful! And so they followed us up through the village and they were having a good time running around. And when we got to the church there came storming out of the church the priest who saw what was happening, and he drove those kids away as fast as he could. And they ran! They had met him before. They didn't linger.

And suddenly, in that moment, I had a strange idea. I thought of all the little babies I have baptized in my ministry and I thought of all the little babies, God willing, I will still baptize in the future. Like that lovely little baby this morning. Oh, so--so wonderful, so clean, smelled so good. And I said to myself, "But, when Jesus made that remark long ago, 'Let the little children come unto me,' he wasn't talking about those babies I baptized. He was talking about these dirty, filthy little rascals running around me right here." And he saw in those children, neglected, the Kingdom of God. That's when he spoke those words: "Let them come unto me. Don't take them home, dry-clean them. Just let them come the way they are." And in the midst of that dirt, he saw this thing I'm talking about this morning, this divinity, in the face of every little child. And John gives us this picture of this happening--breaking in upon us, divinity in the midst of humanity, eternity in the midst of time.

While the illustration is quite long it illustrates his point superbly. Kennedy had that remarkable gift spoken of in the body of our paper, to see humor "apart from the familiar and commonplace." (page 12)

In passing I might mention that Kennedy, in speaking,

uses the conjunction "and" at the beginning of many of his sentences. In the preceding quotation he begins 11 sentences with "and" (out of 37). He seldom, if ever, does this in his writing, and one wonders why--with his disciplined mind--he would do it in his speaking. We must remember again, however, that this is Kennedy in his later years. He seems to be more interested in enjoying his audience, and they him, than in grammatical perfection.

Our reason for mentioning the matter is that the conjunction "and" is disconcerting and weakens what an individual is saying. Especially in view of one of the rules of the spoken word that crisp, strong sentences are much more effective than long, weak sentences. "And" goes further in weakening a strong sentence.

The next message we want to consider, "Overwhelming Victory," was delivered March 29, 1970, again at the First United Methodist Church, Pasadena. It is an Easter message. Kennedy had spoken earlier that morning at the Sunrise Service in the Hollywood Bowl (one of the shortest messages, incidentally, recorded there), and is now delivering an amplified version of the same message.

He speaks of the essentialness of faith in every phase of living: in marriage, in business, in friendships. He says we cannot prove the existence of love in marriage, but there is no real marriage apart from faith that such love exists. Trust and integrity are essential in business, but they are matters of faith. Friendships are faith relationships. You cannot prove "friendship" in a laboratory

or by scientific experimentation. He then tells the story of a little boy who attended "prayer meeting" with his grandmother:

There was a little boy who used to go to prayer meeting with his grandmother every week. (Some of you older folks remember we had prayer meetings?) And one day there was a circus coming to a nearby town and a neighbor took the little boy to the circus. And he saw the parade, and he saw the clowns, and he saw the three rings full of action and excitement. O, what a time it was! And when he came home he tried to tell his grandmother about it and all he had seen. Finally, unable to really express it, he said, "But, I'll tell you one thing, grandma, if you ever go to the circus you'll never want to go to another prayer meeting!"

Well, he was right. And the gospel sees life more like a circus than it does like a prayer meeting. And the Christian faith brings to us this excitement, this wonderful thing waiting for us. Unproveable. But, we take it by faith. And we say, "Oh, we can hardly wait for the next chapter and the next step."

Notice the frequency of the "ands" again. Here is an illustration that does not fit "perfectly" into the point being made, but Kennedy brings it around to fit his meaning at the end. Here, again, is a "home-spun, earthy" type of illustration that establishes rapport with his audience, in this case with the older generation.

Abraham Lincoln and Kennedy had several things in common. Lincoln used "home-spun, earthy" language familiar to the people of his day, especially the "ordinary" people. His cabinet chafed under his "ordinariness," but Lincoln found that it spoke to the individuals he desired to reach. He was "a man of the people," by choice. So was Kennedy.

Kennedy speaks at one point of the desire of medical science to prolong life. Even to having some "diseased" bodies "frozen" for a number of years. When the cure for

the disease is found (with every indication that it would be) the bodies would be "thawed" and the cure applied. Kennedy speaks of the quality of life being so much more important than the quantity, and includes this illustration:

I remember that Gladys Cooper, a great actress, said: "I always hate to have Noel Coward read a play for me, especially one of his own. He always makes it sound better than it is." And I feel like saying to science, "You always make it sound better than it is."

Here we see the economy of words more characteristic of Kennedy and a typical humorous illustration he often used to clinch a point.

In another message entitled "Authority" (preached April 5, 1970, First United Methodist Church, Pasadena) Kennedy spoke with great conviction and concern, somewhat more than usual. One is impressed with the experience of the man and the voice of "authority" that has been hard-earned and self-evident. This, again, is Kennedy in his later years.

He divides his message into four parts: two negative and two positive. For the negative he says "authority cannot be taken, as in a battle or in the conquest of a nation." Secondly, he says "authority cannot be given" as in the case of a businessman wanting to delegate authority to his son." In the positive he says "authority comes from within, from an individual's personal integrity." Finally, he says "the only real authority comes from God."

Speaking of authority coming from within, according to one's personal integrity, he gives the following

illustration:

One of my friends up north sent me a sermon he preached this last week, and in that sermon he told a pretty good story. He referred to a cartoon. He said the cartoon had two clergymen talking to each other, and one said to the other one: "Well, they've shut me up on poverty; they've shut me up on race; they've shut me up on Vietnam. All I can talk against now is wearing shorts in the shopping plaza."

Wouldn't that be something? But that isn't what a church does. Oh, a church is such a wonderful fellowship. Even when the man says a thing you don't agree with, you'd rather have him say it and be honest and true, than to cover it up because that might please you, or he might think that would please you. But, anyway you look at it, at the end of the day--all we have is just our character, that's all.

There might have been a more pointed illustration of his point, but his comments upon it are well-taken. One does not immediately think of a man's inability to preach on anything save "the wearing of shorts in the shopping plaza" having to do with one's "personal integrity," but his comments upon it help us to see his interpretation of the story and the point he is attempting to make.

The only other humorous illustration he uses has to do with "the authority that comes from God":

I shall never forget an evening I spent a few years ago back in New Haven. Bishop (Fulton J. )Sheen was there and I sat next to him at the dinner they had and I began to talk to him and he talked to me. I said, "Bishop, you sound like a Methodist," and he said, "Bishop, you sound like a Catholic." And we found out finally that our problems were about the same--a man from the Catholic Church and the Methodist Church were almost the same. We discovered that we had the common problems to share with each other. I have known a few Jewish rabbis very intimately and when I came to know them I decided that their problems are the same as any Methodist preacher. Isn't that strange? About the same thing. And through all this and our relationship with one another has come to me this wonderful affirmation of the ecumenical movement (not COCU, God forbid!)

but the ecumenical movement that brings us together and says each one of you have (sic) a part to play in this and your authority goes back to God. You can't be given it, you can't take it by force. A part of your character, and your devotion. Your authority comes from God.

Apart from some loose sentence structure and repetition of phrases ("I began to talk to him and he talked to me . . . ." "I have known a few Jewish rabbis . . . and when I came to know them. . ." "their problems were about the same . . . about the same thing . . .") the story itself is not directly connected with the point he is making. It would have been better to help prove "our common task," or "that which we all hold in common," but, again, Kennedy brings it around to fit his purpose. It almost seems as if it were a "favorite story," though one cannot tell what was in Kennedy's mind.

This is one of Kennedy's more thoughtful sermons. He is, in himself, a good example of his own message: "Authority comes from within, from one's personal integrity."

We shall consider one more sermon before we look at Kennedy's "Bishop Laymen's Luncheon" address. It was chosen for its humorous title: "You've Come A Long Way, Baby." It was preached on Mother's Day, 1969 (First United Methodist Church, Pasadena). He divides his message into three sections so far as the "Feminist Movement" is concerned: Past, Present and Future.

Regarding the Present (which he says "never is very good"), he relates the following story:

Bishop Roy Short told me the other day that he

has a little church down in Kentucky, and they weren't using Methodist material in their Sunday School. So the Board of Education sent a couple of fellows down there to sell them on Methodist material in the Sunday School. They agreed probably they ought to use it. And then there came a letter from the Board of Christian Social Concerns which this church assumed was the same bunch that had been after them the week before. This Social Concern group had sent out a questionnaire and the first question was: "What are you doing about pornographic material?" They answered: "From this church (sic) we're using it in all our Sunday Schools now."

Kennedy's comment following the story was: Well, that's the present--where we are." I would assume he is alluding to the confusion of the times in which we live, though there was no mention of this prior to the story. As a matter of fact he had just alluded to a troublesome meeting he had attended in which a number of racial slurs had been made, completely out of keeping with the meeting. It was evident that the meeting had disturbed Kennedy a great deal. One is somewhat at a loss to determine what the story meant to Kennedy at this juncture in the message.

He used one other humorous illustration that was quite relevant and to the point. In his concluding remarks he indicated that the only real progress the "feminist movement" could make would be from within, from within the individuals themselves. He then told a story about Lorenzo Dow and Peggy:

The Methodists had a very dim view of marriage in America. Francis Asbury said, "At one time I have seen 200 of the best men in America, no, the best men in the world, leave and locate because they got married." He lost preachers everytime they got married. He said, "The marriage ceremony to me is the knell of death." That's what he thought about it.

Well, now, there was a Methodist itinerant by the name of Lorenzo Dow, and he was eccentric. He was worse than most of us. He went everywhere; he didn't stay home at all. And he fell in love. A young lady whom he refers to as Peggy. He didn't want to marry her, he knew he shouldn't. He knew what Asbury thought. And he put it off and fought it. But, finally, just before he started out one time on a three-month preaching mission, he said to Peggy: "Now, if while I'm gone you don't find anybody you like better and if you will promise to get along by yourself three years out of four, and if you'll promise never to try to talk me out of doing my duty as a Methodist preacher, I'm going to ask you to marry me when I get back." That's a romantic kind of proposal! But, he went on his trip and he came back and she was there and she hadn't changed her mind and she married him. And, strangely enough, it was a very happy marriage. And Dow went all over, usually not with her. He was in England telling them how to organize camp meetings for a while. But their whole life together was joy. Because with all the experience she had gone through, somehow she loved him. And if I ever see her, I'm gonna say, "You've come a long way, baby. You tell me about it."

The illustration stands by itself as a good portrayal of what he wanted to say.

In passing we might mention that one other message by Kennedy was considered ("Surprises" preached May 17, 1970), but it contained no humor as such. We mention this only to say that Kennedy did not always use humor.

Let us look now at the address Kennedy delivered to the "Bishop's Laymen's Luncheon" (in the Fall of 1959). This was an annual event and a delightful occasion for all who attended, especially Kennedy. He said on more than one occasion that this was the only luncheon of its kind in the Methodist Church and any other bishop would give his right arm to have it. The address is entitled, "Ordinary Men."



Dr. Ernest C. Colwell was the Master of Ceremonies on this occasion. He was then President of the School of Theology at Claremont. Himself a master wit, he all but "stole the show" from Kennedy in his presiding, particularly as he introduced the head table and the distinguished guests. These included Governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, Congressman Joe Holt, the Sheriff of Los Angeles County, the Mayor of Los Angeles, supervisors from the city of Los Angeles, and State Senators. Quite an imposing assemblage!

We will give Dr. Colwell's introduction of Bishop Kennedy, for Kennedy used a portion of it to respond to in his opening remarks:

It is my privilege to introduce our speaker. Any-one of a dozen methods of introduction are available to the man who would introduce Gerald Kennedy. He has been a prized lecturer at the great universities of this country. He is respected in international councils. He is a tremendous force within our own church. He has published books and while they are not as unintelligible as those which I have published, nevertheless they are good books. He has at least four or five times as many honorary degrees as I have. They put all of mine on the program, but they were kind to me and left his off. But all these things are just the trappings of office. They are the badges of success and of rich achievement. We don't respect them in and of themselves. What we as laymen respect is a strong man, and in Bishop Kennedy we have a strong man in the leadership of a great church. Mr. Bishop we shall delight to hear you.

Kennedy's opening remarks:

President Colwell, Governor Brown, honored guests and my Methodist brethren. What the President really meant when he pointed out the difference between our books was that he's a scholar and I'm just a simple, Bible-loving Christian. There's a vast difference between us.

Kennedy was to capitalize on that title, "A simple, Bible-loving Christian" many times.

After his opening remarks, Kennedy gets immediately into his message. It is a much younger Kennedy. Not in terms of years, but in terms of quickened pace, sharpness of wit, and precision of delivery. This setting was generally one of levity. But Kennedy could sway his audience to match his moods, as he did on this occasion. Here we see Kennedy at his best, especially in his use of humor. It is interesting to note that many of his humorous stories received generous laughter (some more than they merited, possibly), but the occasion was one of high spirits and good fun. A lot of the atmosphere must be credited to President Colwell's "warm-up" of the audience.

Kennedy opened the main body of his address as follows:

Now, when I get rather discouraged with the church (and that's every now and then), I find great help in turning back to the New Testament and reading the letters of St. Paul, especially his letter to the Corinthians. Because I find that bad as we are, they were worse. That cheers me up! (loud laughter)

Here Kennedy identifies very quickly with his audience, establishes rapport, and makes both speaker and audience comfortable with one another.

He continues:

In one place in his first letter (Paul) in a masterpiece of understatement said, "You are behaving like ordinary men." And that's what I want to talk about today. (laughter)

Here is an illustration that by itself would not appear very humorous, but received great laughter on this occasion:

In my youth I used to read H. L. Mencken a great deal. He was kind of a patron saint for me. He was cynical and disillusioned, and so was I. I outgrew it but he never did. (loud laughter)

The next story he told, oddly enough, got little response even in this highly-charged atmosphere. Who can explain an audience's reaction to one story as opposed to another? Kennedy was speaking of Jesus' dealing, fraternizing with "ordinary people," and he advised his audience that they should do the same. He then tells this story:

In a certain neighborhood a Polish family was moving out and a little girl came in. She was crying and her mother said, "What's the matter?" She said, "Well, this family is moving." And her mother said, "I didn't know you were so fond of those little Polish girls. And her daughter replied, "It isn't that, mother, but now there's nobody around that I'm better than."

Ah! We want that.

The story fell "flat." A mere trickle of laughter. Kennedy even paused longer than he normally does for their response. It was an embarrassing moment. He quickly gained control of the situation, however, and brought in another story:

Trying to think this morning who said this, and I can't remember. I think it may have been a judge, but I don't know which one. It wasn't Judge Wood. But somebody said one time, "Thank God I never lost my taste for low company." Neither have I. I like you fellows! (roaring laughter)

Kennedy recaptured his audience very quickly. He concluded the above remarks with: "And I think that he

(Paul) would say something that is rather important:  
 'Brethern, begin with this and never depart from it--we  
 are all ordinary men.'

Later on he mentions the point that we may be  
 tempted to use the title "Ordinary Men" as an excuse for  
 mediocrity, and we haven't that right. Then he tells this  
 story:

Oliver Herford one time made a remark which I  
 thought a great deal of. He said he thought of all  
 God's creatures the crab had developed the most sat-  
 isfactory philosophy of life. Because, he said,  
 whenever the crab is confronted with a great moral  
 decision he pauses for a moment to think what is right,  
 then he moves sideways as fast as he can.

He told this in connection with our wanting to skirt some of  
 the moral issues of life, if we could. But we cannot. To  
 do so makes us worse than "mediocre," it makes us cowards.

Speaking further concerning "mediocrity" he gave  
 this illustration:

Like the Buffalo paper way back in 1925 writing  
 a story about the eclipse of the sun, putting it down  
 under "local news"--bringing it down to the level of  
 mediocrity. (mild laughter)

Again he gives an illustration about mediocrity, only  
 this time he speaks of it as "rising above the average to  
 become not mediocre, but extraordinary men." We need to rise  
 to the occasion of the times in which we live. He then gave  
 this illustration of "rising to the occasion."

Some years ago a young fellow by the name of Sam  
 Davis had a chance to interview the most famous actress  
 of her day, Sara Bernhardt. She was out here in the  
 West and she was quite a person apparently. Sam Davis  
 owned a little paper up in Carson City called the  
 "Carson Appeal." He represented the San Francisco  
 Examiner, and he was also a representative of the

Associated Press. After he had had his interview, Sara Bernhardt liked him very much, and as he was about to leave she kissed him on the left cheek and she said, "That's for the San Francisco Examiner." She kissed him on the right cheek and she said, "That's for the Carson Appeal." She kissed him on the lips and she said "That's for yourself." And nothing abash, Sam Davis said, "Madam, I should like to remind you that I also represent the Associated Press which serves 300 newspapers west of the Mississippi alone!"

I like that, brethren, for there was a man who could rise to the occasion. (loud laughter)

About mid-way through his address Kennedy made an aside that might have embarrassed his guests at the speaker's table, for it was to them that the remark was made, primarily:

If you would read the Bible, brethren (and not many of you do), (but) if you would read it, you would discover that it is a book about ordinary men. . . .

He may have meant it in jest but it came across as sarcasm. This is a trait Kennedy had to guard against. In this instance it might have been better if he had said, "Many of you read your Bibles, I'm sure, and you have discovered it is a book about ordinary men. . ." With such a statement those present would have recognized that he knew many of them did not read the Bible, but he would give credit to those who did.

Kennedy was not above taking certain groups or individuals to task, publicly. He openly criticized the Nixon Administration and our involvement in Vietnam, he often took individual politicians to task, and I can remember an occasion when he publicly criticized the professors of a certain university for their pettiness, jealousy of one another, and small politics. Needless to say certain

"professors" took the Episcopacy to task.

He seemed to have ambivalent feelings about the youths of his day (when the "hippies" were in vogue), both admiring them for their independence and chastizing them for their dress. In this address he speaks of one youth:

I saw a kid the other day over on Sunset Boulevard dressed like a shepherd. I wanted to stop and say, "Mac, where are the sheep?"

We contrast this with a statement he wrote earlier:

Make no mistake about it, the church which will not listen to its youth will die. For God can say things to young men that old men cannot hear. Give me the boy with energy and the spirit of adventure, any day. He will fall on his face and he may antagonize the old-timers, but wherever there is life there is hope. May the good Lord deliver us from the young fogies who are harness-broken before they have a chance to kick up their heels! Treat the rebels kindly, O Church Fathers, and give them love and appreciation.<sup>11</sup>

Kennedy seemed to be aware of his "arrogance," however, as this section from For Preachers and Other Sinners indicates. He is quoting his country-preacher friend from "River Center."

"Well, he went on, "here's an article in a preacher's magazine by a dean of a theological seminary. Now this fellow has never been out of a classroom. He never served a student church. He never had to deal with an ornery music committee or resist the lethargy of the deacons. You know what he says about ministers? He says they are arrogant and full of pride. I don't know anybody like that--except you," he added nastily. I ignored it and he went on."<sup>12</sup>

The last humorous illustration he used in the "Bishop's Laymen's Luncheon" had to do with Will Rogers. Kennedy was

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<sup>11</sup>Gerald H. Kennedy, For Preachers and Other Sinners (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 33.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

still speaking of mediocrity and those who prefer to let someone else make the difficult decisions:

Will Rogers, I discovered, was an honorary Mayor of Beverly Hills. Will Rogers said one time: "I never made a mistake. Probably because I never made a decision."

Kennedy used this as a spring-board for admonishing those present to be sure they would make wrong decisions, but that would be no excuse for leaving the decision-making to someone else.

We now want to look briefly at Kennedy's humor on the printed page, using two of his books known primarily for their wit and humor: For Preachers and Other Sinners and While I'm On My Feet. The former is primarily a compilation of articles published in The Christian Century Pulpit, under the title of "The Mourner's Bench." Kennedy assumed the name of G. Hobab Kish. The latter is his autobiography published in 1963.

We would do well to quote a number of articles from For Preachers and Other Sinners, in toto, for they are gems of wit and muted sarcasm. For our purposes, however, we shall select only a few portions.

In his chapter entitled, "Alibis," Kennedy talks about those who have gotten the "bad breaks," who have never been "at the right place at the right time." Among them are some preachers:

And when it comes to the preacher--ah, brethren, this will wring your heart! The system held him back, and while he ought to be in First Church, he was penalized by jealous officials. He spoke like a prophet,

and his people stopped coming. A cantankerous layman who was present in every church he ever served undermined his leadership. Strange, but in every congregation he has had the same experiences for the last thirty years. Those other successful fellows? Compromisers--politicians--wirepullers--lucky! Not once in all his ministry did this fellow ever admit, "Maybe I goofed. Maybe I give the impression of being arrogant, tactless, and brittle."<sup>13</sup>

Kennedy was often at his best when using muted sarcasm. His love for the church and the ministry were apparent, however. In the foreword to this book he writes: "Preaching is still my first love; preachers are my favorite people."

In a delightful piece on "Panels," Kennedy discusses a popular means of wasting time:

The gripe--I mean the subject--for today, is panel discussions. I am afraid it is too late to do anything about this method of wasting time, for it has become firmly established in our mores. You just cannot have a conference or a program without some member of the committee bleating forth: "I think it would be nice to have a panel." The only sensible answer to the suggestion is "Why?" But to question this lowest form of communication is to label oneself as hopelessly out of step with the times.<sup>14</sup>

. . . . .

There are always the same fellows on every panel. They have different names and they look different, but they are actually the same ones disguised. One is bashful and will only mumble a few words if he is put on the spot. He is probably the brightest one of the bunch, but he does not express himself well. His stammering is painful, and one wishes that he had written out a speech and read it. Another is the blunt type. He blares forth his opinion with assurance and with an air of "there will be no nonsense or even courtesy about this." The trouble is, he is not very bright.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 6.      <sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 69.      <sup>15</sup>Ibid.



On the matter of trying to "be all things to all men," Kennedy has a few choice words--again to the clergy:

I have known a few preachers who spent all their time trying to please every family in the congregation. This really takes some doing, for these families range all the way from what appear to be leftovers from a prehuman species to the way-out folks from the world of tomorrow. Some want a fundamentalist and some want a crusader. This woman likes high-church services and this man wants the atmosphere of a country dance. Here is a family who want a real, folksy pastor, and over there is a family who want the sermon to sound like the rough draft of a Ph.D. thesis in Philosophy. The point being that nobody can please all the members all the time, even in a fairly small congregation.<sup>16</sup>

We should notice here the clear, precise language that Kennedy uses. The well-constructed sentences, the obvious omission of the conjunction "and," are all in evidence here. Again, we recognize that this is the printed word as opposed to the spoken, and probably the best we can expect is a half-way station.

Any number of excellent quotations could be taken from this book to demonstrate Kennedy's wry sense of humor but we now must turn to his other volume, While I'm On My Feet. This is not intended as a humorous book, but inasmuch as it is written by Kennedy, humor was inevitable. In the opening chapter, "Background," he talks about his preference for people who "get things done":

I like men with soft hearts and hard heads. The Methodist impatience with mushy do-gooders and its admiration for result-getters fits my temperament. Emerson and his son once tried to get a calf into the barn without success. Emerson pulled and his son

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

pushed, but the calf refused to budge. Then the maid came along and, putting her fingers in the calf's mouth, easily led it inside. Emerson wrote in his Journal that night: "I like people who can do things." So do I.<sup>17</sup>

In a number of instances it is apparent that Kennedy is blending humor with personal preference. Some examples:

The mimeograph machine (that invention of the devil) enables every bore to spread his dullness across the earth and so mutilate words that they become hated--or worse, unnoticed.<sup>18</sup>

If the children of Israel had depended on a committee, they would still be in Egypt.<sup>19</sup>

Apparently, as Chancellor Adenauer one time put it, God has made man with limited intelligence but with no limit set for his stupidity.<sup>20</sup>

As one of my colleagues one time said, "The Methodist Church polity makes it possible to move preachers when necessary, and it is too bad we cannot now and then move a layman."<sup>21</sup>

Bromley Oxnam told me one time that a bishop will offend ten percent of the men every Annual Conference so that in ten years, everybody will hate him.<sup>22</sup>

Some people are always having devotions, which is all right if they would not insist that everybody else join with them.<sup>23</sup>

In Kennedy's written humor he is short, to the point, with a noticeable economy of words. In his spoken humor he is more relaxed and conversational, especially in his later years.

There is also a marked difference between his message

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<sup>17</sup>Kennedy, While I'm On My Feet, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 23.    <sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 89.    <sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 101.    <sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 103.    <sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

at the "Bishop's Laymen's Luncheon" in 1959 and his sermons at First United Methodist Church, Pasadena in 1969 and 1970. He is much faster in his delivery in 1959, more disciplined in his approach to a particular point, and even a bit more abrasive. He mellowed with the years. It is the same Kennedy but with his sights lowered a bit from his goal of perfection as a preacher. In 1959 he was still striving for that perfection, in 1969 he seems to enjoy preaching just for the sheer thrill of it. He enjoys the rapport with the people in the pew. He no longer has to prove his credentials, they have been made. Now he can simply enjoy his favorite delight--preaching.

Were we to attempt to analyze and summarize his use of humor, I would say it is, as a general rule, carefully selected, brought in to enlighten the point he wishes to make, serves as a "breather" between major points, and is designed to let his audience "up" psychologically from time to time. It is certainly intended to make his audience comfortable with him and he with them. It is "folksy" humor, directed to the "man on the street," the practical man/woman who would like to know how to put Christianity into everyday life.

In so far as it relates to the "functions" of humor delineated in our paper (chapter 2) we shall select the ones most appropriate to Kennedy's style and purpose. We shall also use the numerical sequence suggested there. We would say that he certainly (1) avoids the ludicrous,

(4) is acutely aware of the language he uses, and (6) proves that "when we laugh together we feel closer to one another." He further, as Joyce Hertzler suggests, (10) makes excellent use of a humorous story to capture the essence of his message. He also observed James Feibleman's suggestion that (11) reserved ridicule is an effective use of humor. Ample illustrations of this abound in his book For Preachers and Other Sinners as well as in many of his sermons, articles, and public statements. Kennedy was not adverse to taking public figures and issues to task, often with a vengeance.

Kennedy also proved the importance of a function of humor suggested by Kenneth Carlson, (12) that it can give a necessary change of pace to the sermon. He also (13) proves that humor relieves tension, (15) sharpens the listening, and (16) establishes rapport with the audience. Kennedy was gifted in the use of humor to (18) drive home a point. He fulfills Ralph Johnson's suggested function of humor that it (23) enables someone in the congregation to identify directly with the story, thus establishing rapport with that individual. Kennedy established rapport with the greater part of his audience through his repeated use of "homey, down-to-earth" humor and the use of illustrations most of them could identify with every easily. In another suggestion by Ralph Johnson, Kennedy used humor to (24)

relax himself and his audience, and he further used only that humor which was in keeping (26) with his personality and style of preaching.

Kennedy particularly fulfilled the function that (28) humor should never exist for its own sake but to support a theme or idea.

Bishop Kennedy brought a "built-in" authority to his preaching. He was a man of accomplishment, marked achievement, dedication, honesty, warmth and wit. As a world traveler he "rubbed shoulders" with the world's great. His prolific reading made him current with not only the latest ideas but the times in which he lived. He was always contemporary. His language was "salty" even to the point of being "abrasive" on occasion. But as his speech would get him into trouble it would most often get him out again.

His conversational style endeared him to the average layperson, as did his free-style preaching (without notes). In later years he had the added credential of "an elder statesman." One listened with anticipation to what he had to say because he always said something. He set an example for his ministers that few, if any, were able to follow. Some dared to imitate his style but were destined to failure. His style was uniquely his own. With his stroke a few years ago our nation lost one of its great pulpit voices. We shall not see the likes of him for many decades. We who served under him are deeply grateful for the privilege and example of his leadership.

For his philosophy of preaching we can do no better than let him express it in his own words:

I do not know what conscious aim other preachers have when they preach. For me it was to proclaim a conviction about God's nature, God's will, God's resources, God's promises. It was to hear a testimony of God's love revealed in Jesus. It was to create a faith that the gospel is the answer to all human questions and the solution to all human problems. It was to prophesy against evil and heal the brokenhearted. I would sometimes become so frustrated with my inadequacies that it seemed only a stupid egotist or a blind fool could continue as a preacher. But I have never been able to escape the conviction that preaching is nothing less than God in Christ using a poor, unworthy man to proclaim his Word.<sup>24</sup>

#### B. Dr. Kenneth A. Carlson

Dr. Kenneth A. Carlson has served, until quite recently, as senior pastor of United Methodism's "Cathedral of the West," (First United Methodist Church, Glendale, California) for the past 17 years.

He has been honored in many quarters, has spoken all over the nation, and is still one of the most sought-after speakers in the country. He was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, coming to this country in his early youth. He is a graduate of the University of Southern California, and received his Master of Divinity degree from Garrett Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois. His doctorate was conferred by the University of the Pacific, Stockton, California.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

At one time he was special lecturer for the Southern Pacific Railway in the midwest while in seminary, also serving as the minister of First Methodist Church, Lake Forest, Illinois. Ken has always had a keen interest in the railroad, and even now has an impressive array of memorabilia in his study regarding his life-long interest in the railways.

While pastor of the First Methodist Church in El Centro (1945-48) he was radio minister for Mutual and ABC network stations in the Imperial Valley. His radio show entitled, "Kenny Carlson's Fireside Philosophies" merited the largest listening audience in that area.

He came to the First United Methodist Church, Glendale, in 1960, having previously been appointed to another church in that city several years before (Central Methodist Church, 1940-45). That, in itself, is an unusual experience for a Methodist minister. As a clergyman in Glendale he has been honored many times. He was selected in 1944 as Glendale's Outstanding Young Man of the Year, received that city's Distinguished Community Service Award, the Mayor's Commendation Award, Kiwanis Certificate of Merit, and was presented four Freedoms Foundation George Washington Gold Awards for outstanding sermons.

Ken has been a frequent speaker on radio and television. For 25 consecutive years he has been on the air. For the past 17 years he has spoken on KIEV before an audience of 500,000 listeners. John Dart, Religion Editor of

the Los Angeles Times, in a feature article recently wrote: "He is a living legend among connoisseurs of the art of profound preaching."

It was my privilege to serve with Ken Carlson on a Conference Board for several years. My association with him has been a delight. I have long been enamored with his effective leadership, his effective pulpit style, his gracious spirit, warmth, and his unique sense of humor.

It will not be possible to give as much detailed information about Ken Carlson as about Bishop Kennedy, primarily because Carlson has not written an autobiography, nor has a biography been written about him. He has not published any books as such. There are a number of his sermons in print as well as tapes of his messages, but these are not in wide circulation. Nevertheless, he is eminently qualified as a model for preaching, particularly in his use of humor. It is a hallmark of his speaking and preaching.

A comparison of Ken Carlson and Bishop Kennedy might be instructive. Both are contemporaries, and United Methodists. Both are speakers of distinction, and both use humor very effectively.

K. Morgan Edwards, Professor of Preaching at Claremont School of Theology, knows each man well. When asked to compare them, he said: "Kennedy is the debater turned preacher, and Carlson is the after-dinner speaker turned preacher." Carlson is now a public-affairs speaker for the Glendale Federal Savings and Loan Bank, and is



recognized as one their most popular and entertaining speakers. He would also qualify as one of their most inspirational. It seems to me there is much merit in the church "loaning" one of its most gifted speakers to the secular world. Carlson may be able to reach many who would never attend a worship service, and in that respect have a more effective ministry than many a parish minister.

Both men are dedicated churchmen having given their lives to the service of Christ and his church. I count it among my greatest privileges to know them both.

We now want to turn to some of Ken Carlson's personal remarks on the use of humor that I gathered from an interview, and finally analyze two of his taped messages from the standpoint of their humorous content.

The following is a transcript of portions of a taped interview I had with Dr. Carlson in January of 1976:

Q. Dr. Carlson, why do you use humor in your preaching?

A. I always felt humor was the oil that kept the gears of living running. I always use humor at two points and for two reasons: One is that I would use it at the beginning of a sermon, at some point in the introduction, as a lead into the sermon, what I am going to talk about--three things I want to say about the subject. I do that to build attention into the sermon and the body of the sermon. I don't use it simply to be funny, but to illustrate, so that I can follow up with the clincher. The humor must illustrate what I am trying to say, theologically.

Q. How would you characterize your preaching?

A. I suppose I would characterize myself as a life-situation preacher. Taking the gospel and

making it relevant to day-to-day living, and as many times as you can, either through good illustrations or humor, clinch what you are trying to say. Just as Jesus did with his parables.

Q. Should every minister attempt to use humor?

A. I think it depends on the man. There are some men who cannot tell a story, who do not know how to use humor. When they use it, it falls flat and this leads to a negative reaction. It all depends on how it is used, where it is used, and whether it ties in, is relevant to the thing you are saying.

Q. How important is timing in the use of humor?

A. Timing is very important. When I used to speak before the Toastmaster's Group, a question that always was asked was: "How did you develop your sense of timing?" and I always had to say, "I don't know. I did not develop it. You either have it or you don't." Fortunately, from the kind of public speaking I have done for all types of community groups over the years, I have developed a sense of timing, of just seeming to know when humor will contribute to a situation. If I see an audience starting to wander away, I immediately pull them back with some humor.

Q. How do you determine what humor to use and what not to use with a particular audience?

A. When I go to a place I always keep about six things in the back of my mind. I look at the audience, and I see how things are going before they introduce me, then I will determine at that point which one of the things I am going to use, under a general heading--such as, "The Person These Times Demand."

Q. Will you ever use humor you had not planned to use, particularly in a sermon?

A. I always have in the back of my mind, even when I am preaching--in the event something totally distracting happens, or I am falling flat--some humor that I can fall back upon. Even if it is just a quick quip. But it will pull an audience back. I don't think it's a question of whether humor has substance, primarily. I think it's rather if it contributes to the enjoyment of listening for the congregation.

Q. Are there any disadvantages in using humor?

A. Well, I don't think so, if it is used correctly, and I guess I have to put quotation marks around "correctly" as to what that means. That could mean something to me and something else for you, and I think a man has to use good judgment. No, I cannot think of any real disadvantages in looking back over my ministry. I cannot think of any situation where humor has damaged or hurt a talk.

Q. Is your humor presented differently to outside organizations as opposed to, say, the church on a Sunday morning?

A. If I am speaking to a service-type group, or outside the pulpit, I use more humor than I do in the pulpit. With community groups it is much easier to move along their attention lines by using humor. I may even use some humor that is not necessarily relevant to what I am saying, particularly at the beginning, just to create a relaxed atmosphere and make the people feel it's not going to be the "long-nosed, long-faced" kind of preacher they thought they were going to hear. Unfortunately, in the eyes of many community people, there is a stereotyped image of the preacher, and I always try to communicate the feeling that a preacher is just as human as anybody else.

Q. This may not be a fair question, but are you ever tempted to tell an "off-color" story to a community group to establish your image as "just like everybody else"?

A. I have never used an "off-color" story on the public platform. Now once or twice I have used a story that someone has misinterpreted--and then I drop it. But any story that lends itself to a double twist, and someone points it out--even if I fail to see it--I don't use it anymore.

Q. Is there any place in the pulpit for muted sarcasm?

A. You might use something like the woman who asked another woman if her husband was a bookworm, and she said, "No, just the ordinary kind." That is a sarcastic kind of humor, but it isn't offensive. If the humor is sarcastic you put a psychological block between yourself and the congregation.

Q. Do you keep a systematic file on humor?

A. No. I have clippings and notes, and I know where to find them, but I don't file them in any systematic order. It's just not my style. I have a kind of memory that keeps all these stories on a moment's call--I guess I would have to say I have a gift for recalling stories.

Q. Do you think Jesus used humor?

A. Yes, I'm convinced he did. Anyone who was liked as much as he was by children and the common people must have used humor. I think he, as a lover of life, liked humor himself. He was a joyful person, and joyful people enjoy the lighter moments of life.

Q. Where do you find most of your humor?

A. Mostly from observing life all around me. I like to observe people, and they are the best source of humor for me. Sometimes a person will tell me a story, a person in the congregation, and I will use it. If I use a story told to me by someone in the church I always change it to a person of another sex, or someone older or younger--so that the person that told it to me will not recognize it. Sometimes I ask someone for permission to use a story he told me. I try to give credit for stories I have heard from other ministers, especially if the man himself is involved in the story.

Q. Is there ever an occasion when humor is not out of place during a solemn occasion, such as a funeral?

A. Yes, I have used humor on several occasions at funerals. It has to do primarily with the deceased. If he or she was a humorous individual then humor would be in order at their service. Not long ago the head janitor at our church, a delightful Mexican fellow--well-liked by everyone--died, and I had his service. I referred several times to humorous things he had said, without the intention of being funny. He had a lot of trouble with the English language and some of the things he said just didn't come out the way he intended them to. I spoke of several of his language problems, which he always took good-naturedly, and it was very much in keeping with the way everyone knew him. It was said in fond remembrance, not to make fun of him in any way. No one thought it was out of place.

- Q. Should every minister try to develop a sense of humor, even though he/she may not have an aptitude for it?
- A. I'm not sure a man can develop something he does not have. But, to the degree that he could develop something he may have and does not know it--yes--I think every minister could benefit from a sense of humor. How does he survive without it? I don't see how a person can keep his sanity today without a sense of humor.

Dr. Carlson was guest speaker at a chapel service in 1976 at the School of Theology at Claremont. He spoke of his experiences as a Chaplain on the Glendale Police force. For the most part it was a serious address, but it nevertheless was sprinkled with humor. He even began with a humorous illustration:

One of our boys recently asked me "Why is it when you go in the pulpit Sunday morning you always bow your head and close your eyes?" I said, "Well, son, I always pray the good Lord will make it a good sermon." And he said, "Why doesn't he?" You may feel a little of the same way--because I am not striving for homiletical perfection this morning. But, I thought I would like to do something and share with you that which might be a unique element of my own ministry.

This was a good way of putting his audience at ease and make them feel comfortable with him. He speaks of serving for the past ten months as a Chaplain, along with a Roman Catholic priest, a Jewish rabbi and a Lutheran pastor.

He speaks of the church getting into the "arena of life":

What this is doing--it is putting the church right into the crisis moment of human experience. We are of service in death notification, in counselling with police officers and their wives (and be sure these men and women have problems). Likewise, we become involved in family disturbances. On three occasions I have been in a family disturbance that involved members of our own church, and

if you don't believe that didn't quiet it down in a hurry--when their preacher walked in, in a police uniform--we were not called back a second time in any one of the situations.

The humor here is again very human, down-to-earth, even though the situation is paranormal.

He speaks of the loneliness of the "big city":

Persons who feel unloved, who are not cared for, who come to the conclusion they are no longer wanted, deteriorate mentally and physically much more quickly than a normal person.

He picks up the title "normal person" and illustrates it by way of humor:

Now, I'm not sure what I mean by a normal person. Someone asked the doctor if he's ever met a normal person and he said, "No, but if I ever do I'll cure him!"

Carlson is using the interplay of seriousness offset by humor. It is an excellent means of psychological relief for an audience when you are asking them to consider weighty matters. It is an illustration of one of the functions of humor we spoke of in our last chapter, function number 13: "humor relieves tension."

Enlarging upon the second portion of his message he says:

There is a second basic law. In a law of life there is a secret ministry of God that says: In every human experience it is not the situation but what you do with the situation that determines its outcome.

He illustrates this with one of his experiences as chaplain on the police force:

An old gentleman, some 78 years of age, was brought into the emergency room with a massive heart attack and the doctor whispered to me, "He's going to die." The

patient unfortunately overheard the conversation and he rose up and said, "You aren't going to kill an old horse like me!" And he was determined. I visited with him the next day in the hospital, and as I visited with him the old gentleman yawned. Now I have seen a lot of yawns in my life, mostly in church, but I have never seen a yawn like this fellow had. His whole face disappeared! And finally when his facial geography had rearranged itself he looked at me and smiled and said, "It isn't everybody who gets to see my liver!" And I thought to myself, "What a marvelous thing it is when a person can keep a sense of humor in the crisis moments of human experience. And it was his attitude and his sense of humor that took away the tensions of the heart and enabled it to mend. For he was able to let go, and let God."

Dr. Carlson uses humor sparingly in this message, but always effectively. The above was one of his closing illustrations and it fairly well summarized what he wanted to say: "Let go and let God."

The second message we want to consider is more deliberately humorous. It is given away from his church, at the Church of Religious Science where he has been invited to speak on a Wednesday evening. The date is September 10, 1975. The senior minister, Dr. William Hornaday, is on vacation and the service is presided over by his associate, the Rev. Fred Hayes. Carlson has spoken on several occasions to this congregation.

He is introduced by the Rev. Mr. Hayes who also tells a humorous story in his introduction which he obtained originally from Carlson. We include it here because Carlson refers to Hayes' use of humor in his opening remarks. The following is Mr. Hayes speaking:

We were in Chicago, Dr. Carlson and I, along with a couple of thousand other Methodist ministers and

workers. We were walking down one of the streets. We were staying at the Stevens Hotel, so you know how long ago it was. They've changed the name of the Stevens Hotel, they might have even changed the name of the town for that matter since we've been there. No! We were walking down the street and he said, "A funny thing just happened, I was walking through the lobby of the hotel and I overheard one of the people not in the convention ask one of the bellboys, "What are all these men doing here? What are they? Is it some kind of a convention?" The bellboy said, "Yes, it is. They are a bunch of Methodist ministers. And they came into town four days ago with a ten-dollar bill and the Ten Commandments and they haven't broken either one of them yet."

Ken Carlson responds in his opening remarks:

Whenever I listen to Fred tell one of his stories, I always have the feeling he ought to be on the stage. And there's one leaving in about 20 minutes.

He continues his preliminary remarks with no less than four humorous stories in a row, each following directly upon the other:

I always remember when I was out in Santa Monica, I preached one Sunday morning on the theme, "Do You Know What Hell Is?" and directly after the service one of our lovely ladies came forward and she said, "Dr. Carlson, that was a very fine sermon, very nicely delivered." I don't think she meant this as it sounded, but she said, "I want you to know we didn't know what hell was until you came here." And you may have something of the same feeling before we get through here tonight.

I remember taking my car in to get some work done on it in Glendale on one occasion, and I got talking to the mechanic and I said, "I hope you'll go easy on me, I'm just a poor Methodist preacher." He said, "I know, I heard you last Sunday."

I was talking with my wife recently about great preachers in this country. I asked her how many great preachers she thought there were in the country. "Well," she said, "I really don't know, but there is one less than you think." And I think she was right.

Someone tells a story of an old mule packer who was coming along one day and he happened to come upon a smart-alecky young cowboy. The cowboy took out his six-guns and he looked at the old mule packer and he said, "Old man, have you ever learned how to dance?" And the



old fellow was taken back a little and he said, "No, I guess I never have." The cowboy said, "Well, you're going to now." So, he began to pump bullets all around his feet and sure enough the old gentleman learned how to hop around. And when he ran out of bullets, the mule packer leaned across his mule and he took out a big 'double-barreled shot-gun, and he pointed it at the young cowboy, and he asked, "Son, have you ever kissed a mule?" And there was a long pause and the young fellow said, "No, sir, but I've always wanted to."

He concludes the story of the mule packer with this:

"As soon as the invitation came to share in this distinguished pulpit this evening, I immediately wanted to come because of my friendship with Dr. Hornaday, and Fred . . . and your great church here."

It is interesting that Carlson used three of his stories to reflect upon himself in a self-deprecating manner. "We didn't know what hell was until you came," "I'm just a poor Methodist preacher," ". . . there is one less than you think," all are intended to present himself in humility before his audience--as well as in fun. Humor directed at ourselves is generally the safest form of humor, so long as it is not overdrawn.

One could ask the question if so many stories at the beginning of a message are a bit bewildering to an audience? Is it possible that such an array of stories could cloud the subject of the evening? For a less able speaker this might have been the case, but it seemed to be an accepted part of Carlson's style. We say "accepted" because it is highly likely that the audience anticipated such an introduction as this--from Carlson. In any case, I had difficulty with it (as a listener to a tape), and it

made me wonder if the whole evening would not be given over to nothing more than a proliferation of humorous stories.

Each speaker has to set his/her own style and that which works best for him/her in any given situation. What is comfortable for one could be horrendous for another. It is apparent that such an approach worked well for Carlson, particularly that evening.

He tells the story of a young Catholic girl:

A young girl who stood in a long line at a Catholic confessional said, "They really ought to have a speed-up line here for those who have three sins or less."

Carlson used this story to introduce his theme for the evening, "Dealing With Worry." His remarks following the story were: "Whether you have 100 sins or three sins I'm sure tonight that all of us would have to include among the three, this plain, simple, everyday, nagging word: worry. For it is an integral part of life." It was a good introduction, simply stating that a common ailment we all possess is worry. None need feel ashamed that they worry, all of us do. Again, it was an attempt to put his audience at ease, and alleviate any guilt feelings they had about worry.

After spending some time on "our tendency to worry," Carlson says:

Now there are legitimate worries. The person who says to you "I never worry" has never tried to sleep in a room with one mosquito buzzing around. Of course we worry. And I've always been sympathetic toward the woman who worried because she was married to a ventriloquist who snored on both sides of her at the same time. You would worry about that, too.

Again, the attempt is made, successfully, to rid his audience of any guilt feelings about worry.

Carlson then moves to his text, which is very short: "Jesus said, 'Be not anxious.'" He says:

I know it's always a dangerous thing to quote a text this late at night because it's always a signal for you to go to sleep, and you'd be surprised how many nodding acquaintances I make on Sunday mornings. Someone said if you take all the people who go to sleep in church and lay them end to end, they'd be more comfortable--and I think there's something to that.

Perhaps this is as good a juncture as any to state that Carlson has a seemingly inexhaustible supply of "maudlin jokes," stories that have been around a long time. Nevertheless, he proves that not everyone has heard them which is evidenced by the response of his audience. Very few of Carlson's stories are of recent vintage. Most of them have been told and retold for many years. It is possible that some have even been forgotten. Congregations are generally very generous to ministers--they will even laugh out of courtesy oftentimes. But, a string of such jokes will inevitably "stereotype" the speaker, and some will wish that he had a more recent joke book.

He speaks about "controlling what comes into our heads," and introduces it with this story:

A little girl was asked where she got her red hair. She said it came with her head. And one of the wonderful things that has come with your head is the ability to control our thinking.

He then moves into the matter of "taking things in stride," as a means of overcoming worry. He cites the

appearance of a 100 year-old mailman who delivered mail to Conference Headquarters (United Methodist Center in Los Angeles) for many years. He had retired over 30 years ago and was a centenarian now. He was called up on the platform and asked how he had been able to stay alive so long. His reply was, "Well, I learned to take things in stride." Then Carlson tells a story about the oldest bishop of the United Methodist Church, Bishop Welsh:

Bishop Herbert Welsh was the oldest bishop of the Methodist Church. He lived to be 106 years old, and when he was 102 we brought him out to Los Angeles and Art Linkletter had him on his House Party show. I remember Art Linkletter turned to the bishop and said, "Well, how long do you expect to live?" And Bishop Welsh smiled and said, "Well, I presume I will live forever because you don't hear of many people dying after they are 100." He had learned to take things in stride. In fact, when he was 104, you know what Bishop Welsh enjoyed doing above everything else? Going to Radio City Music Hall to see the Rockettes! And man, that's living when you're 104!

He follows this quickly with another story about a centenarian:

I remember an old gentelman, 102, who was interviewed, and the reporter asked him what he thought of women and he said he hadn't thought of them for three years.

Continuing on the theme "taking life in stride" he says:

If life hasn't worked out the way you think it should have, so what? If anybody had ever told me I'd be a Methodist preacher, I would never have believed it. I wanted to be a concert pianist. I studied at the Manitoba Conservatory and the McPhail School of Music in Minneapolis, and everybody said I was going to be the Rachmaninoff of this generation. Well, a few people mentioned it . . . the fact is my mother spoke of it once.

Again, self-deprecation, which seemed to delight his audience.

He continues on the theme of controlling our minds and controlling what motivates our lives. He speaks of his attending the medical library in one of the large hospitals in Glendale:

Whenever I go into a medical library, I sit down and read a medical book. You know what happens? Whenever I read about a disease and read about its symptoms, I'm sure that I've got it. And by the time I'm through I've got every disease in the book. It's strange what the mind does to us.

Most of our worries, 92 percent of them, are imaginary. Up at the Mayo Clinic they told this to a fellow who came in there one day in a frenzy and said he was worried about himself. Everytime he breathed his heart squeaked. So they checked him over and oiled his suspenders and sent him home.

Two excellent illustrations of "imaginary worry."

He recites the story of a young man who heard him speak at the University of Redlands one time. After the service the young intellectual came up to him and said, "I'd like to believe some of the things you have talked about, but all my life I have been taught to doubt everything." He responds to the young man, then comments: "Because we have learned to doubt does not mean that we have found the answers."

If you remember that old story, I'll refresh your memory of the young man walking through the cemetery one night and he tripped and he fell into a grave and he struggled to try to reach it but he couldn't make it, and so he thought he'd settle down and spend the night and hope they'd find him in the morning. And he just got settled down and about 10 minutes later another young man came walking in the dark and he stumbled and fell into the same grave and he, too, struggled and tried to reach the top of it and he thought--well, he'd settle down and hope they'd find him in the morning. And he was just starting to settle down and a hand reached out in the dark and tapped him on the shoulder and said, "You can't get out of here"--but he did!

This story leaves something to be desired from a grammatical standpoint. There are at least 16 connecting "ands." It seems to be a common fallacy among speakers, even speakers of renown. We criticized Bishop Kennedy for the same thing. Perhaps it is an unconscious trait of the spoken word.

In any case, Carlson concludes the above illustration with: "You see we get into these ruts of doubt and cynicism, and we think we can't get out of them. But we can." The illustration is well-taken. It serves well to illustrate the point he attempts to make, with the added advantage of humor.

This is not his closing illustration. The rest of the message is geared toward the inspirational and the more serious. In all, the message is meaningful, closely aligned with his topic, and relevant. It was very well received by the congregation at the Church of Religious Science.

Ken Carlson does something that is common to many public speakers, but I am not sure of its legitimacy. For want of a better heading I would call it "poetic licence." He will use a story and put it in the first-person, telling it as if he himself were involved. For example, in the story about the woman speaking to him after the service when he spoke on, "Do You Know What Hell Is?" It is not likely this happened, and the probability is it did not. The same can be said of the mechanic who said to him, "I know,

I heard you last Sunday," or the matter of his wife telling him there was one less great preacher in the world than he thought. All of these, obviously, are more effective in the first-person, but they do tend to bring about a credibility gap for some in the audience.

If there is a definitive code of ethics in this matter I have not heard of it. It would appear to me that the more often a man or woman can tell a genuine story in which he/she is involved, the better. The matter of making yourself that party in any number of "well-known" stories might present a problem. It is not outside the realm of possibility that the next guest speaker could tell it as his/her story as well. I can imagine a child in the audience saying, "He's not telling the truth."

It reflects on most of the stories we have heard from people of renown who have placed themselves in the first-person. There is little doubt about the story being more interesting to the audience, but most audiences have no doubt learned to take such references with a large dose of salt. Perhaps the general warning should be made known; beyond that each speaker is responsible for his/her own statements.

Let us now consider Kenneth Carlson's use of the various functions of humor, again utilizing the numbers as they appear at the conclusion of chapter two: He obviously makes every effort (1) to avoid the ludicrous, and (2) does not demean another person or race. But in the matter of

demeaning oneself (3) he would have to plead guilty. It is also an excellent tool for him to establish rapport with his audience.

He (5) uses humor to soften sorrow and severity, as he did at the funeral of his church janitor. Undoubtedly he would agree that (6) when we laugh together we all feel closer to one another. Such laughter also (7) helps us to be more human. Like Kennedy he uses humor to (10) capture the essence of his entire message on numerous occasions. He has often used (11) reserved ridicule, as in the case of his opening remarks about Fred Hayes. He uses his own advice about (12) allowing humor to give a necessary change of pace to the sermon (or speech), and he would agree that humor (13) relieves tension, (14) establishes the minister as a human being, (15) sharpens the listening, (16) establishes rapport with the audience, (18) makes it easier to drive a point home, and (20) makes it possible for minister and people to come closer together.

He would agree with Ralph Johnson (23) that a humorous story can enable someone in the congregation to identify directly with what the speaker is trying to say. Carlson certainly (26) uses humor in keeping with his own personality and style of preaching, which seems to be uniquely his own. He might come closer to being guilty of establishing a reputation as (27) a "teller of funny stories," though he seems to be aware of the danger of this (per his statements in the recorded interview). I'm not



sure he would agree entirely that (28) "humor should never exist for its own sake but solely to support a theme or idea." Carlson said (in the recorded interview again): "I don't use humor simply to be funny, but to illustrate." But in the same interview he said, "In the event something totally distracting happens, or I am falling flat--I have some humor that I can fall back upon. I don't think it's a question of whether humor has substance, primarily. I think it's rather if it contributes to the enjoyment of listening for the congregation." One cannot be sure from the above statements just how seriously Carlson treats humor solely for illustrative purposes.

Both Kenneth Carlson and Bishop Gerald Kennedy have made extensive use of humor in their preaching. Both would agree, I believe, that humor has enhanced their preaching as well as their ministry, their total ministry. Both have been exceedingly popular speakers. It would appear that humor is not an option for them but a vital necessity.

Perhaps it would not be stretching the mark to say that humor ought to be employed where possible (and as it compliments the speaker's style) in order to make the sermon or speech as effective as it can possibly be. Humor is an integral part of the secular world, it would hardly be possible that the world of the sacred would be that far removed.

## SUMMARY

This study was undertaken for two reasons primarily: I have long had a personal interest in the use of humor in preaching and have felt the need for further knowledge in this area, and I felt that such a study might be of benefit to others who desire to use humor more effectively in the pulpit.

Comparatively little has been written from the minister's viewpoint on the use of humor. A goodly number of books are available on the subject of humor, its techniques and psychology. There are any number of anthologies available, "joke" books and the like. Most are very limited in value to the preacher. One must "plow through" many such anthologies and joke books to find suitable material. Compound this with the fact that every individual has to find his/her particular style or type of humor and the search becomes even more difficult.

Books on the techniques and psychology of humor are quite useful for their purpose. Such do not have to be slanted toward a particular profession, such as the ministry, for they cross vocational lines and are helpful to anyone who utilizes humor in public speaking.

In our Introduction we referred to the difficulty of finding suitable material. We stated that the preacher who has made effective use of humor in preaching either has a natural aptitude for it, has made something of a private

study of the techniques and uses of humor, or has learned most from trial and error. Nevertheless, each would attest the effectiveness of humor in preaching.

Preaching is serious business. None will deny that. For that very reason humor is desirable if we are to present the gospel as effectively as possible. A congregation needs the psychological release humor brings. Jesus himself used humor, as attested in the gospels. Elton Trueblood reminds us that there is often a difference between our use of humor and Jesus' use of it: Jesus used it solely for the purpose of illustrating and supporting truth. We often-times use it simply as a means of obtaining a laugh.

Our society places a high premium on humor. Professional comedians, television comedies are in high demand. We should not assume that the religious person is that far removed from the secular in the enjoyment of laughter.

In our first chapter, *What is Humor?*, we looked broadly at the concept of humor, dividing our study into four major headings: *The Genesis of Humor*, *What Makes Something Humorous?*, *The Preacher and Humor*, and *The Sensitivity of Humor*. We looked at the origin of humor and discovered that it is probably as old as the human race itself. While the Greeks popularized "comedy," the Romans were the first to define "humor" as such. The concept of humor has undergone radical changes historically, ranging from cynical laughter directed toward the dwarf, the cripple, and the paralytic, to the concept we have of

it today--as an excellent (and harmless) form of entertainment and a necessary psychological release.

Any number of situations, circumstances and events combine to make something humorous. A number were outlined. Harvey Mindess has given us a graph depicting the essential elements in the telling of a humorous story. Martin Grotjahn reminds us that not all professional comedians are as humorous in real life as they are before an audience, though there are many that are. As an example of the former we cited the case of W. C. Fields.

The preacher must look for humor in many different situations and circumstances. Acquiring skill in the use of humor is an exacting process. It is somewhat like Thomas Edison's definition of genius: "(It) is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration." It must be seen apart from the familiar and commonplace. One must stand apart from the mainstream of life and analyze situations with detachment and objectivity. We looked briefly at "How to Tell a Humorous Story," also.

There are a number of "sensitivity" areas involved in the use of humor. It must never be used to demean another person or race. One should not use sarcasm (though there is a gentle, harmless kind of sarcasm to which we refer.) Humor can be used at a funeral service, though one must be aware of the sensitivity of the occasion. While we should be sensitive in our use of humor, we should nevertheless be courageous in laughing at life's seeming incongruities.

In our chapter on "The Rhetoric of Humor" we analyzed both the classical Greek and Roman rhetoricians and modern speech therapists and rhetoricians. Plato and Aristotle, for instance, lived in the "dawn" of comedy and were not concerned with the theories, functions or purposes of humor. They viewed it primarily as an art-form over against tragedy. Cicero and Quintilian were also beginning to discover the uses and functions of comedy. Modern speech theorists and rhetoricians have discovered many functions of comedy and humor, and have helped to apply them to contemporary society. Irene Nye informs us that so-called "modern" humor is not modern at all. Humorous stories and jokes that are current in our generation have their counterparts in early Greek and Roman writers.

Eric Auerbach in Mimesis reminds us of the radical change that took place in classical literature and in the social strata of the ancient world with the coming of Christianity. Jesus gave meaning and purpose to the lives of the lowly, the despised of the Greek and Roman world. Coming from the lowest social strata himself, his very being as the "Son of God" lent inestimable value to the lives of the downtrodden and social outcasts. It might very well have served to introduce "humor" to the masses of mankind. The ancient apartheid system of the Greeks and Romans gave little room for joy among the socially inferior. It is difficult to overestimate the impact the coming of Christ had upon the ancient world.

Contemporary speech theorists and rhetoricians view humor in positive, even therapeutic terms. Humor has gained a respected place in all levels of society and serves as an essential ingredient in every person's makeup.

In addition to consulting books by contemporary rhetoricians we sent out 21 questionnaires to ministers noted for their successful use of humor in preaching. Each questionnaire was completed and returned. Most were in the immediate area, fellow members of the Pacific-Southwest Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, though some were in outlying districts. Among these were Dr. Edward W. Bauman (Foundry United Methodist Church, Washington, D. C.), Dr. Davie Napier (former President of Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley), and the Rev. Ronald Meredith (formerly pastor of the First United Methodist Church, Wichita, Kansas). I also taped interviews with three local United Methodist pastors: the Rev. George Mann (pastor of the First United Methodist Church, Pasadena), the Rev. Ralph Johnson (former pastor, California Heights United Methodist Church, Long Beach), and Dr. Kenneth A. Carlson (former pastor, First United Methodist Church, Glendale). The tape with Dr. Carlson was used more extensively in the third chapter. All very graciously gave their time and expertise in their interpretation of humor.

Summarizing the rhetoric of humor gained from classical Greek and Roman writers, contemporary rhetoricians, questionnaires, and taped interviews, we listed 31 functions

of humor at the conclusion of chapter 2.

In our third chapter we analyzed the books, recorded messages and an interview of two prominent United Methodist clergymen, Bishop Gerald H. Kennedy and Dr. Kenneth A. Carlson. For an analysis of Bishop Kennedy's humor we used several of his books (including his autobiography), a number of his taped messages, and my personal recollection of several of his messages delivered at Annual Conference and on other occasions. Dr. Carlson also has a number of recorded messages, and I had the additional benefit of a recorded interview. Both men have much in common. They are United Methodist pastors, neither made use of notes in preaching, both are known for their effective use of humor in the pulpit, and both have been exceedingly popular speakers. Nevertheless they are distinctively different personalities with individual styles. They have both made excellent studies in the use of humor in preaching.

What conclusions can we draw from this study?

1. Humor is an exacting art. In order to be most effective in a sermon it must serve primarily to enlighten, to support a theme or idea, and must never exist solely for its own sake. Too much humor, used indiscriminately, will weaken a sermon. Too little can make it too "heavy" and never allow for a "change of pace." Humor can be used to introduce a new thought or idea (even a controversial one), and it can be used to summarize a section of the sermon or

the entire message. Each humorous illustration must be chosen with deliberate care, told accurately (with particular emphasis upon the "punch line"), and planned to give psychological relief to the congregation at a particular juncture in the sermon.

2. Effective humor is difficult to find. Yet it can be found "everywhere" by him/her who is attuned to it. Reading, conversations, cartoons, people, circumstances, events, all forms of media are resources for humor. One must have an eye and an ear attuned to it. I would strongly recommend a file of humor as it is found. Through ones ingenuity much humor can be originated. Like truth and beauty, it is in the eye of the beholder.

3. One should be sensitive to the "sensitivity" of humor. It must never be used to demean, or as deliberate sarcasm. It is not out of place during some of life's solemn moments, such as a funeral, but it must be used carefully, even prayerfully.

4. One should feel comfortable with humor before using it, though there are some who do not feel comfortable with it because they have not made extensive use of it. Every minister would do well to attempt to cultivate the art, simply for the psychological release it gives to both speaker and listener. Not every message lends itself to humor, but some are deficient in effectiveness without it. Humor establishes the preacher as a human being who enjoys the lighter moments of life.



5. Everyone likes to laugh. There is enough sorrow and suffering in the world to demand the presence of humor. If for no other reason, it is valuable in helping to keep ones sanity. Every congregation likes to participate in the lighter moments of life as much as the more serious.

6. Every preacher must develop his/her own style of humor. He/she cannot borrow another person's style. Such an individual should make his/her congregation know early in a new pastorate the intent to use humor. The congregation will anticipate it and become accustomed to the individual's particular "brand" of humor.

7. It is inadvisable to "bring in" humor on the spur of the moment. Humor most often calls for careful planning in advance. It is not only carefully chosen to enlighten and support, but it is strategically placed. Spur of the moment humor more often distracts than supports.

8. One should avoid the reputation of a "teller of funny stories." The emphasis then passes from the gospel to entertainment. The preacher who becomes known primarily as an entertainer is not being faithful to the seriousness of the gospel.

9. Humor, properly used, generally makes a speaker more interesting and enjoyable, and often more sought-after. This is not to say he/she is not a serious speaker, for humor is most effective when placed in the context of profound preaching. It does say that serious preaching coupled with a lighter view of life makes for a good, healthy balance.

10. Humor can be used quite effectively in one's ministry outside the pulpit. The preacher is often called upon to speak at secular functions such as community gatherings, service clubs, or as an after-dinner speaker. Humor can establish early rapport with an audience. It also establishes the minister as a human being, one who enjoys the lighter moments of life. It further helps to correct the often stereotyped image associated with the clergy as a serious "man of the cloth." The seriousness of his message will be made even more palatable with the inclusion of humor.

11. As Dr. Carlson suggests, humor is an excellent means of bringing a "change of pace to the sermon." "A boxer always changes pace as we call it, so does a swimmer, and I think those of us who are on the public platform likewise have to develop the art of changing pace. Humor is one form of doing that."

12. From the standpoint of some of the classical rhetoricians, Cicero in particular, the three functions of the orator are: to please, to instruct, and to persuade. Humor used in the context of "pleasing" or "delighting" seems to play a most important role. This is not to say that humor is imperative to make a sermon pleasing, but to suggest that it is one important means of keeping the interest of the hearers, without which little teaching or persuasion will occur.

13. There appears to be a kinship between philosophy

and humor in that both get the elements of a situation back into proper perspective. Philosophy is set over-against the unchanging, the eternal. So is humor. Jesus is a good example of one who used humor to put a situation in its proper perspective. The rich man attempting to get into heaven with his riches (compared to the camel trying to get through the eye of a needle), or the farmer who tore down his barns in order to store his abundant crop (whose soul was required of him that day), are two examples.

14. Lest we overstate the case for humor in preaching it should be stated that sermons can be most interesting, fruitful and instructive without the use of humor. Often a vivid illustration can serve the purpose of providing a "change of pace," or assist in enlightenment or support. Humor is only effective when it is compatible with the speaker's style and purpose. Those who do not feel comfortable with humor probably should not use it, but they can nevertheless be most effective in proclaiming the gospel.

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